

Biggles

GOES TO SCHOOL

**Captain
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THE events narrated in this book have been set down to satisfy the many readers who have expressed a desire to know something of Biggles' schooldays. It must not be supposed that such episodes as those described were an everyday affair. They were not.

Such events were the exception, not the rule. They were the outstanding incidents of the period when Biggles was new to school life. Even then, for the most part one day followed another, as is usual at school, with little to break the general monotony.

To record such days in detail would be mere repetition; and there would be no purpose in it, because the ordinary routine at Malton Hall School ran on lines familiar to everyone who has been to boarding school. Biggles may have been somewhat unlucky in his first term, although the discerning reader may observe that luck was not altogether responsible for what happened. Let us admit that Biggles' own inquiring mind may have been sometimes responsible for the difficulties in which he found himself.

For the rest, he was no better and no worse than any other schoolboy of his age and era.

Like any normal boy, he excelled in some subjects and failed dismally in others. He was thoughtful, and inclined to be serious rather than boisterous. If he was temperamental, headstrong in some things and nervous in others, it was probably because of a physical weakness, the result of illness contracted early in his life in India, of which he was conscious. He soon outgrew this handicap in the healthy air of his native land.

It must be realised that at the time of which we are writing things were very different from what they are to-day. The country roads still lay under a mantle of white dust that was seldom disturbed by a motorcar. Horses still shied at mechanical vehicles. When he arrived at Malton Hall Biggles had never seen an aeroplane. Few people had. Bicycles were still in their early stages of development, and a three-speed gear was a device to boast about. The telephone was still a modern wonder. Such entertainments as the cinema and radio were unknown. War was a thing remote, except to a few well-informed men, and even they had no idea of the transformations that were to occur when it came.

Rural England still went about its business quietly, and without haste, in the peace it had long enjoyed.

W. E. J.

ENTER BIGGLES

COLONEL HORACE CHASE, M.A., Headmaster of Malton Hall School, affectionately known to three generations of schoolboys as "Chevy," did not glance up from his desk as, in answer to a gentle knock on the door, he uttered a curt, "Come in." Not until he had signed the letter he had just written, and carefully wiped the point of the quill he always used, did he raise his eyes to the boy who now stood in front

of him.

For perhaps five seconds master and scholar took stock of each other in silence. The master saw a slight, neatly-dressed, delicate-looking boy, with a sensitive face, thoughtful eyes and a small but firm mouth. Fair hair was parted at the side.

The boy saw a man of medium build, gowned in black, with a gaunt, clean-shaven face, and close-cropped iron-grey hair. His age might have been anything between fifty and sixty. His eyes were blue and, while not exactly hard, held in them a penetrating quality that made them not easy to meet. Little lines at the corners of a tight-lipped mouth helped to soften an expression that otherwise would have been severe.

It is unlikely that the boy realised the importance of the meeting : the effect that the personality of the man before him was to have in shaping his own—not only for the period of their association, but throughout his entire life. But the master knew.

The Head, leaning back with his fingers together, spoke first ; and there was a crispness in his voice that made the boy start. "So you're the new boy, Bigglesworth, eh ? "

" Yes, sir."

"When did you arrive ? "

"This morning, sir."

"Why didn't you come yesterday for the opening of the term ? "

"I was not well, sir. I had a recurrence of fever." "I see. Have you found your dormitory ? "

" Yes, sir."

"Stand up, boy," ordered the Head trenchantly. "Hold your head up and pull those shoulders back. There's no need to wilt—here, or anywhere else."

" Yes, sir."

"And open your mouth when you speak. If you mumble people can't hear what you say."

" Yes, sir."

"That's better. How's your brother ? "

" He's very well, sir."

"

is he still at Sandhurst ? "

"No, sir. He's got his commission. He was gazetted to the Rifle Brigade last week. No doubt he will be writing to you."*

"A fine fellow, your brother," averred the Head. "He should make a good soldier. He was here for nearly three years, you know."

" Yes, sir."

The Head's face softened as he smiled. "The boys called him Biggles. They'll call you that, too, I expect.

* Major Charles Bigglesworth, D.S.O., M.C., was killed in action in September, 1918.

Had he still been here we should have had a Biggles primus and a Biggles secundus."

"I'm sorry he's not still here," said Biggles, feeling more at ease.

"He was Captain of the School of his last term—but you know all about that, no doubt.

How old are you ? "

"Fourteen and a half, sir."

"Your brother was about that age when he came. I hope you'll do as well. '

" I'll do my best, sir, but I think it's very unlikely," said Biggles frankly.

The Head frowned. "Is there any reason why you shouldn't ? "

"He was bigger and stronger than I shall ever be." "But you want to be a soldier, don't you ? " asked the Head, sharply.

" No, sir."

The Head's frown deepened. "You understand this is primarily a school for boys going into the army ? "

"Yes, sir. That's why my father insisted on my coming here. He wants me to be a soldier."

"And you don't like the idea ? "

"It isn't that I don't like the idea, sir, but I don't think I'm cut out for it. You see, sir, my health has never been very good."

"Hm," mused the Head. He pulled forward a sheet of paper. "Your uncle, Brigadier-General Bigglesworth, mentions that in this letter. He was here twenty-five years ago."

You've been staying with him, I understand ? "

"Yes, sir. I've lived in his house, in Norfolk, since I was sent home from India to recover from fever."

"He tells me there's no reason why you shouldn't become a first-class soldier. Your father was not a soldier, I believe ? "

"He wanted to be a soldier, sir, because of the family tradition. But his health broke down, so he went into the Indian Civil Service. He's now Assistant Commissioner in the United Provinces."

"I see. And you were born out there ? "

"Yes, sir."

"Is your mother still there ? "

"My mother died some years ago, sir."

"Oh. Did you go to school at all, in India ? " "No, sir. There was no school near us. I had a private tutor. My father also took an interest in my education."

"What did your father teach you ? "

"He taught me to ride, sir. I had my own pony, and played a little polo, and sometimes cricket, mostly with boys of the country. He taught me to shoot. I did quite a lot of shooting."

"Gun or rifle ? "

"Both, sir, but the rifle chiefly. My father started me off with a point two-two when I was quite small. When I could hit sitting targets I used to go out with an old skikari—who also taught me tracking—to shoot crows and hawks on the wing. He said it was good practice."

The Head smiled. "I should think it was. Did you ever hit one ? "

"Yes, sir, often. I had plenty of practice." " Ever bag a tiger ? "

Biggles smiled ruefully. "No, sir. I had a chance one day, but I only wounded him. My father was very angry about that because the beast was a man eater. My father shot him at the finish."

"But you got a leopard, though, so your uncle tells me ? Saved a man's life."

Biggles shrugged. "It was nothing, sir. The fellow was an old packman. The brute went for his goats, and when he tried to drive it off it attacked him. I just happened to come along. The leopard was so close I couldn't very well miss."

"But you stood up to him ? "

"I was too scared to run, sir," confessed Biggles frankly.

The Head smiled tolerantly. "Well, stalking and an ability to hit birds on the wing with a single bullet may be amusing pastimes," he observed, "but as accomplishments likely to be useful to you in your chosen career they can be ignored."*

The Head looked again at Brigadier-General Bigglesworth's letter. "I understand you have been reading books rather in advance of your age ? "

"My uncle seems to think so, sir. I've spent a lot of time in bed, where there was nothing for me to do except read."

"What did you read ? "

"Books about travel and exploration chiefly, sir. I like to know about other countries."

"What about history ? "

" I've read quite a lot of history, sir."

* Which shows that headmasters can sometimes be mistaken, for it is

probable that these were the very crafts that within five years were to lift Biggles into the top flight of combat pilots. At least, it may be said that they went far to enable him to survive a war in which so many of his school-fellows were to lose their lives. But then, at this time air combat was unknown. There were few aircraft, and these had not been armed.—

EDITOR.

"What about fiction ? "

"I've read some detective stories, sir."

"Humph," grunted the Head. "They won't do you much good. What are your best subjects

? " "History and geography, I think, sir."

"What do you mean—you think? Don't you know?" " Yes, sir."

"Then say so. Those are the subjects you find easiest, I imagine ? "

"Yes, sir. When I have nothing to read I always fall back on my atlas. One day I hope to travel round the world and see all these places."

"How about maths ? "

Biggles looked uncomfortable. "No good at all, sir, I'm afraid."

" Afraid ? What are you afraid of ? "

"Well, sir, things like algebra and Euclid. I can't seem to make headway in them."

"That's no reason to be afraid of them. There's no reason to be afraid of anything. You know what they call people who are afraid ? "

" Yes, sir."

" What ? "

" Funks."

The Head's lip twitched. "You wouldn't like to be called that, would you ? "

" No, sir."

"Well, you will, here, jolly soon, if you talk about being afraid. What about languages ? "

"I speak some Hindi from talking to the people of the country in India. And I'm fair at French, or so my tutor said. I'm not so good at Latin, though."

"What have you been doing in Norfolk ? "

" Pottering about my uncle's estate with one of the gamekeepers, sir, mostly. The doctor wanted me to get plenty of fresh air and exercise."

"Do you know any other boys ? "

" No, sir."

"Why not ? "

"There were no other white boys near us in India, and after I came home, when I met any I didn't know what to say."

"That's something you'll learn here," said the Head drily. " Very well, Bigglesworth," he went on. " For a start I'm going to put you in the Fourth Form. We'll see how you get on.

You can join it right away. You'll find the classroom on the right of the Big School. The form is now taking French. Introduce yourself to Monsieur Bougade. I must give you a word of warning about that. Monsieur Bougade is new to this country. His English is therefore rather limited, so I have made it a rule to double any punishment for misbehaviour that occurs in his class. That is to discourage boys from trying to be funny at his expense. You understand ? "

" Yes, sir."

"For the rest, you must learn to stand on your own feet. You may find some of the boys a bit rough, which means that you'll have to learn to take care of yourself."

Biggles looked puzzled. "I don't quite understand, sir. Why are the boys rough ? "

The Head smiled faintly. " Because they're boys. As you haven't mixed much with boys of your own sort you may find things a little difficult at first ; but you'll soon get the hang of it. Remember what I said

about standing on your own feet. It's no use running to me with your troubles. Only one thing can teach you to be a man, and that's your own conscience. Never forget that before an officer can expect to control his men he must be captain of himself. You'll have to join the School Cadet Corps, of course."

" Yes, sir."

"I'll see about your uniform. Now go and join your class."

"Thank you, sir, I'll do my best," promised Biggles, and started for the door.

" Boy ! "

Biggles spun round. " Yes, sir ? "

"Have you forgotten what I said about keeping your shoulders back and your head up ? "

No, sir."

"Then why don't you do it ? "

Biggles drew a deep breath. " I'll remember it in future, sir." He went out and closed the door.

Inside the room the Head sat staring at the closed door, his lips pursed, for a minute.

Then he went on with his writing.

II

TRICKED

DEEP in thought, Biggles made his way along the corridor, down the stairs, and through the main passage towards the Big School. A sudden footfall behind made him start to turn, but before he could get round

two hands closed over his eyes, holding his head firmly.

" Guess who it is ? "said a voice.

Biggles stood still. "I'm sorry, but I don't know anyone here yet," he said quietly. "I'm a new boy."

The hands were removed, and he turned to find himself facing a big, loose-limbed, heavily-built boy, with black hair, who seemed to be choking with laughter. Then, to Biggles' amusement, without any explanation, the stranger turned and ran up the passage.

Biggles could hear him still laughing after he had turned the corner.

Wondering at this strange behaviour, Biggles walked on until he came to a door from behind which came the sound of many voices droning the French regular verbs. After knocking on the door, he opened it, went in, closed it, and then turned to face the room.

On a rostrum, a short, dark, bearded man, who had been speaking, broke off abruptly ; and at the expression that suddenly convulsed his face every head in the room turned.

A yell of laughter rent the air ; but it died suddenly to a tense hush as the French master began walking slowly between the desks.

Biggles went to meet him. "I have been ordered to report to Form Four, monsieur. My name is Bigglesworth."

There were more titters, again quickly hushed as Monsieur Bougade spun round with an angry hiss. Very calmly the master turned back to Biggles, his eyes on his face. He nodded his head slowly, at the same time rocking himself gently on his heels and toes.

At last he spoke. "So you are so droll, you think ? " he said in a silky whisper.

Biggles, completely at a loss, could only stare helplessly. All around him boys were choking with suppressed laughter, some stuffing handkerchiefs into their mouths.

"I'm very sorry, monsieur, but I don't understand," he said at last.

The master offered no explanation. He returned to his desk, wrote a short note on a slip of paper, folded it, and came back to Biggles. "My compliments to the Headmaster, and please to give him this," he said succinctly, holding out the note. "He will make explanations."

" Yes, sir."

Biggles went out. As he closed the door behind him another yell of laughter came from inside the room—again to be swiftly silenced. Slowly he made his way back to the study he had just left. He

knocked, and receiving an invitation to enter, went in. He marched straight to the Head and delivered the note. "Monsieur Bougade sends his compliments, sir, and asked me to give you this."

The Head's face was expressionless. "Do you know what it's about ? "

" No, sir."

"You remember what I said about playing the fool in French class ? "

" Yes, sir."

The Head read the note and looked up. "On this occasion," he said sternly, " I shall accept ignorance as an excuse. Go back to your classroom."

" Yes, sir." Biggles turned to the door.

"And on the way I think it might be a good thing if you called at the wash-room," said the Head.

" Yes, sir."

Biggles made his way to the toilet accommodation. The moment he opened the door he understood everything, for facing him was a mirror. He stopped dead when he saw his face. Around each eye was a ring of soot, giving him an absurd, owlsh expression. He realised that this must have been funny to others, but seeing nothing to laugh at himself he went over to a wash-basin and removed—not without difficulty—the offending disfigurement. He knew, of course, how the trick had been played on him.

He had just dried his face when into the room came an untidy-looking boy, rather smaller than himself, with a round, good-natured face, well sprinkled with freckles. A wisp of limp, hay-coloured hair dangled diagonally across his forehead. His nose, slightly up-turned at the end, seemed to be too small for his face, to which it gave a pert expression.

A swelling on one cheek suggested toothache, but when it switched suddenly to the opposite side with a faint gurgle of satisfaction, Biggles realised that the bump was caused not by a gumboil, but by something the boy was sucking. Pale blue eyes smiled at Biggles from behind steel-rimmed spectacles, one side of which had evidently been broken, for it had been tied up with a piece of string.

" Hello I" said the newcomer cheerfully. " I'm Smith tertius. I see you've managed to get it off."

"Yes," answered Biggles, without enthusiasm. "Who did it ? "

"I don't know his name."

"What was he like ? "

Biggles described the boy who had put his hands over his eyes.

Smith tertius nodded.

Just what I thought. It



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was that rotter Hervey. He always plays that trick on new boys, but he should have known better when Froggy was taking class. Any of the other masters would have laughed, but Bougade, being new, wouldn't see the joke. But that's like Hervey. He's a cad, and the worst bully at the school. All over the place you'll see where the kids have chalked up Hervey is a bully,' or 'Hervey is a beast and a cad.'"

A movement at the door made both boys turn. It was the object of

their conversation, and from the expression on his face it was at once evident that he had overheard.

In three swift strides he had crossed the room and taken the ear of Smith tertius between his finger and thumb. "So I'm a cad, am I ? "he demanded wrathfully.

Smith let out a squeal of agony.

"A beast, am I ? "

An even shriller squeal from Smith.

Biggles stepped in. "Yes, you are " he cried. "Leave him alone!" He snatched at the bigger boy's arm.

Hervey made a swipe at him. Biggles ducked and, hitting out blindly, caught Hervey in the stomach. That did it. The next moment all three boys were locked in a furious scuffle—it could not be called a fight. Hervey slipped and fell. The others fell with him and the engagement was continued on the stone floor. There was a good deal of noise.

How the tussle would have finished had there not been an interruption is a matter for surmise ; but above the thumps and grunts and gasps another voice now made itself heard. "All right, Hervey, that's enough of that. I've told you about it before."

The contestants broke apart and staggered to their feet. A tall, good-looking boy of about seventeen was standing in the doorway.

"They set on me," growled Hervey.

"I've heard that one," retorted the newcomer. "Clear out before I give you a thick ear."

With a final scowl Hervey went without another word.

The big boy smiled, took a paper bag from his pocket and, after helping himself to a sweet, offered it. " Like a sweet, kids ? "

The offer was accepted with alacrity.

The big boy looked at Biggles. "You're new, aren't you ? "

"I came to-day," answered Biggles.

"What's your name ? "

" Bigglesworth."

"Was your brother here ? "

" Yes."

"He was a friend of mine. But you'd better tidy yourselves up and get back to class.

Chevy's on the prowl." The boy departed.

"Who was that ? " Biggles asked his companion. "Jack Smalley. He's Captain of the School." "He seems an awfully nice chap."

"He is. The lower school kids worship him. He won't stand for bullying if he sees it."

Biggles looked at himself in the glass. What he saw was not pretty. One eye was closing.

His nose was

bleeding. His tie was at the back of his neck and a sleeve had been nearly torn from his jacket. "What form is Hervey in ? " he asked, as he did what he could with his appearance.

"Same as us—Four."

"Are you in Four ? "

" Yes," answered Smith tertius, as, with the soap he printed on the mirror, in large letters,

" Hervey is a cad." "I must say you looked an ass when you came in with those sooty rings round your eyes. I shall have to go back now." He tossed the soap into the basin and went out whistling.

Soon after Biggles, too, made his way back to the classroom. Just as he reached the door it opened and the Head came out. He stopped dead, drawing himself erect, staring at Biggles' face. " Hello, I see you've bumped into something," he observed cheerfully.

" Yes, sir."

"You should look where you're going, boy," said the Head, and with a twirl of his gown strode on.

Biggles, watching him go, noticed that he seemed to bounce a little as he walked.

The form master, whose name he learned presently was Mr. Bruce, who had returned now that the French class was over, was on the rostrum. Biggles introduced himself and was allocated a desk, which, by an unfortunate chance, he felt, was next to the one occupied by Hervey. He sat down, but before the class could proceed the bell rang for the morning break.

During the interval he had his first opportunity to see the boys with many of whom he was to spend the next three years. It would be futile to pretend that he was happy. It was not so much that he minded school as the fact that he was starting under a handicap, which he was not slow to perceive. In his earlier life he had known fewer than half a dozen boys of his own age and colour. Now he had been dropped into a crowd of more than a hundred. Their behaviour, the things they were doing, even the things they were talking about, were new to him. In short, he felt out of it, as much out of his element as a cat in a pond. His sensations were, of course, those of any new boy at a big school, plus the knowledge of the disadvantages incurred by ill-health and a life of comparative seclusion in a distant country. What he now saw was more foreign to him than the Indian jungle. The older boys were together, playing fives or waiting to play. The young boys had congregated in a corner. Some were fighting, or wrestling, or chasing each other, with a considerable amount of noise. Those of his own age stood about in little groups, talking and arguing, also with a good deal of horse-play.

To his surprise, and somewhat to his alarm, he saw Hervey coming towards him. He braced himself for rough treatment, but the encounter turned out to be altogether different from what he expected. Hervey greeted him with a broad grin. "Hello," he said.

"Sorry about this morning. It was only a jape."

"It's all right," answered Biggles. "I can take a joke."

Hervey produced a bag from his pocket. "Have some monkey nuts?"

"Thanks."

"Go on—you can have the lot," offered Hervey. "I've had all I want."

"I say, that's awfully decent of you," stammered Biggles, taken aback by this unexpected generosity. He didn't really want the nuts, but it

seemed churlish to refuse.

Hervey went off.

A minute later Smith tertius arrived. "What did Hervey want ? " he asked, without preamble.

"He didn't want anything," replied Biggles. "He gave me some monkey nuts. Jolly decent of him, wasn't it ? "

"He gave you some nuts ? " cried Smith incredulously.

" Yes."

"Let's look at 'em," said Smith suspiciously. " It isn't like him to give anything away, although he has more pocket money than anyone else at school."

Biggles held out the bag.

Smith peered into it. "Looks like nuts," he admitted. He took one from the bag, examined it critically, cracked it cautiously, and nibbled the kernel. "Tastes all right," he announced.

"Didn't you expect it to ? "

"No. I expected them to be mouldy," stated Smith frankly. "It isn't like Hervey to give away anything that's any good. When I saw him going over to you I thought at least he'd scrub your knuckles." Smith finished the nut and took another.

"Well, it seems that he's not so bad after all," remarked Biggles, joining Smith in the nut eating.

Smith pointed across the quadrangle. "That chap over there with Hervey is Brickwell.

He's a rotter. They're always together. It's best to bolt when you see them coming. That kid they're after now is Page. He's only ten. He's the youngest boy at the school.

His pater and mater were killed in an accident. Bruce, the form master, isn't bad. When he sniffs it means he's got indigestion—then you want to look out. There goes the bell.

See you after school."

Biggles stuffed the bag containing the uneaten nuts into his pocket and joined the boys trooping into his classroom. He took his place next to Hervey, and the class, which happened to be Euclid, proceeded.

To Biggles it was very dull. He could not understand why it was necessary to go to so much trouble to prove that two right-angle triangles were equal, when it was obvious at a glance that they were.

The preposition concluded, the master turned to the class. He sniffed. "Now," he said, "

what have we proved ? Bigglesworth ? "

Biggles started. " I really don't know, sir," he answered truthfully.

Mr. Bruce sniffed again. He drew a deep breath. " You—really—don't—know ? " he said slowly, but with cutting sarcasm.

" No, sir."

For a few seconds the master stared at Biggles as a man might look at an automatic machine into which he has put a coin without result. Then his eyes travelled from Biggles' face to his feet. They stopped, and remained fixed. He sniffed again, loudly. An uncomfortable silence fell. Every eye in the room was now on Biggles, who was painfully aware of it.

" Bigglesworth, come here," said Mr. Bruce.

Biggles went forward.

"I want you," said Mr. Bruce, in a voice ominously calm, "to turn out your pockets on this desk." Biggles obliged. There was not much to turn out—a blood-stained handkerchief, a piece of string, a penknife, a shilling, and, of course, the almost empty bag of monkey nuts.

Mr. Bruce looked into the bag. "You like monkey nuts, Bigglesworth ? "he observed smoothly.

"Not particularly, sir," answered Biggles.

"But you have been eating monkey nuts ? " " Yes, sir."

"Very well, Bigglesworth. Because you are a new boy I shall show leniency ; but to discourage your dirty habits I shall have to punish you."

" But I haven't eaten any nuts in school, sir," protested Biggles, in a voice pitched high with indignation and surprise.

The master pointed to the floor under Biggles' desk.

Turning, Biggles understood—understood several things. Where he had been sitting the floor was littered with monkey nut shells.

"But I didn't do that, sir," he declared, with the warmth of one who speaks the truth.

"Are you suggesting that someone else ate nuts and threw the shells under your desk ? "

inquired Mr. Bruce, coldly.

" Yes, sir."

Instantly a low hiss ran round the classroom. A voice said " Sneak."

" I did not put those shells there," insisted Biggles grimly, through his teeth.

"Then perhaps you will tell me who did ? "

Biggles' lips tightened. "It is not for me to prove my innocence, sir," he said in a thin voice. "The fact that the shells are there does not necessarily mean that I put them there."

"Then who did ? "

Biggles was silent.

Mr. Bruce looked round the classroom. "Hervey, did you put those shells there ? "

" No, sir," replied Hervey without hesitation. Biggles' lips curled in a smile of contempt.

The master looked back at Biggles. "Have you anything more to say ? "

" Yes, sir, I have," replied Biggles. His voice was bitter. "My word is as good as Hervey'

s. Indeed, sir, I have reason to believe that it is better."

" It is a cowardly thing, Bigglesworth, to try to throw blame on a

schoolfellow," said Mr.

Bruce airily. "You have eaten nuts. You admit that. You still have nuts in your possession. I shall, therefore, draw my own conclusions. You will write me, neatly, a thousand times, I must not eat nuts in school."

Biggles' eyes strayed to the blackboard. "It is easier, sir, I see, to prove things in theory, than it is in reality."

"That, Bigglesworth, sounds very much like insolence," said Mr. Bruce frostily. "You will now write the line in Latin. You can translate it, I presume, into Latin ?"

"No, sir, I'm sorry, I can't," answered Biggles.

Mr. Bruce looked at the class. "He cannot translate it into Latin," he said, with a sad smile, and was rewarded with the titter he obviously expected.

"No, sir," said Biggles evenly. "You see, sir, I have never been where they speak Latin. I could translate the line into Hindi, though."

Mr. Bruce frowned. "Are you trying to be funny, Bigglesworth ?"

"No, sir," replied Biggles. "One speaks the language to which one is accustomed. You speak Latin. I can speak Hindi."

"Go back to your desk," snapped Mr. Bruce.

There were tears of anger and mortification in the corners of Biggles' eyes as he obeyed.

He did not look at Hervey.

The class continued.

III

BIGGLES HITS BACK

IN the weeks that followed Biggles settled down to the general routine of his new life.

He had many unhappy days, but none as miserable as the first. In class and on the playing fields he found he was no worse than the majority of the boys at school, and better than some. This knowledge brought a

degree of self-confidence.

The head was a strict disciplinarian, but not so harsh, Biggles suspected, as he pretended to be. And the same could be said of most of the masters, with the possible exception of Mr. Bruce, who, he feared, had not forgotten or forgiven their first clash. The dislike was mutual, because it seemed to Biggles that the master was too fond of exercising a sarcastic wit at the expense of boys to whom certain subjects did not come easily.

Biggles got on particularly well with Monsieur Bougade, possibly because French was one of his best subjects and he really strove to improve. They often had long talks out of school.

Biggles learned to know his friends, and his enemies. His friendship with Smith tertius had ripened, and they spent most of their leisure together. Why this should be he did not know, because there was nothing remarkable about Smith beyond the fact that he was by nature cheerful, and easy to get on with. Or it may have been a mutual fear and dislike of Hervey and Brickwell that had brought them together in the first place, although this had become more a matter of an armed truce than open hostility. For this Biggles had been responsible, as will in due course be narrated. For some time Hervey had been the bane of his life.

Biggles had not only learned his way about the school and its precincts, but also about the nearby town of Hertbury, and its rural countryside, through which he took long walks, sometimes alone, but more often with Smith. He got to know—by sight, at any rate—many of the local people, tradesmen and the like, particularly those with whom the boys at the school sometimes came into conflict. Notable among these were Police-Constable Grumble, known to the school as "Grumble," and Mr. Sam Barnes, a gamekeeper with a notorious reputation for being handy with his stick. Barnes, Smith told him, was the terror of trespassers. Biggles often saw him about, a big, bearded man, in green velveteens with brass buttons. Being one of the old-fashioned sort, he still wore a bowler hat, which boys often talked of knocking off—but never did. In his heart Biggles had a certain sympathy for him, for from his own experience on his uncle's estate he knew the difficulties, and sometimes dangers, of his work.

On one of his country walks Biggles formed a rather curious friendship, and at the same time made a discovery. It was an exceptionally warm afternoon and he was toiling home up the long hill that led to Hertbury, when, passing a small whitewashed cottage

that stood alone a little way back from the road, a voice said, "Like an apple ? "

Turning, Biggles saw a young woman looking at him over the hedge. She was about twenty, very pretty, and smiling.

Raising his cap, Biggles said he would like an apple very much.

"Come in and help yourself ; there are plenty of windfalls," he was told.

He went in through the gate and lost no time in sinking his teeth into a ripe pippin. The woman helped him to fill his pockets at the tree under which she had obviously been sitting, for a rug had been spread, and on it lay some magazines.

" You're from the school, aren't you ? "she observed, looking at his cap.

Biggles said he was.

"How do you like it ? "

" It's all right," acknowledged Biggles. " It's the first school I've been to, so perhaps I'm no judge."

" Warm to-day, isn't it ? "

"Jolly hot, walking," agreed Biggles, starting on another apple.

"What have you been doing ? " was the next question.

"Oh, just walking, looking at things." " What sort of things ? "

"Anything interesting. I like exploring."

"We've got a cave at the bottom of our garden." Biggles stopped munching. "Not really ? "

" Yes, really."

"You're joking."

"No, I'm not. It's in there." The woman pointed to a cliff, a short distance away, that rose about a hundred feet towards the sky. "Those are the golf links on top."

"They're out of bounds for boys at the school."

"I know. Years ago a boy climbed down the cliff to get to a jackdaw's nest. He fell and was badly injured. The links have been out of bounds ever since."

"Is this cave a real one, or just a little hole?" asked Biggles.

"It's a real one."

"How far does it go on?"

"I don't know. I've never been to the end. It's full of bats."

"May I look at it?"

"Of course. Come in."

The woman led the way to a tangle of bushes that fringed the base of the cliff. She pointed. "There it is."

"May I go in?"

"If you like, but don't go far."

Biggles pushed his way to the low cavern and peered inside. "I wish I had some matches,

"he called. "It's pretty dark in there."

"Would you like me to get you some?"

Biggles hesitated. "I'm afraid I haven't time to explore it now, thanks all the same. I must be getting back to school. May I come another time—Saturday afternoon?"

"If you like."

"Thanks." Biggles' eyes sparkled. "I say, you're an awfully decent sort, you know."

The woman laughed and they went back to the road. "Saturday afternoon about three,"

said Biggles, at the gate. "Mind if I bring a friend?"

"Not a bit. Good-bye."

"Good-bye, and thanks awfully for the apples." Biggles raised his cap and went on feeling that he had a new interest in life.

The following Saturday afternoon, at three o'clock sharp, he was at the gate. With him was Smith, to whom he had confided his thrilling secret. The woman was waiting.

Moreover, she had brought with her a candle and a box of matches.

The cave turned out to be very disappointing. At least, Biggles found it so, although he did not say so. It ran in perhaps a hundred yards and came to a dead end. There were several side turnings, and these were investigated, but they all came back to the main tunnel, forming a little labyrinth that was soon explored. There was one smallish hole which they did not bother to go into, because it would mean crawling and getting their clothes in a mess. Biggles came to the conclusion that the cave was nothing more than the old workings of a disused limestone quarry. But it was, as he averred, better than no cave at all. "It'll be a good place to hide when Hervey is after us," he observed. The bats that hung upside-down on the walls were interesting, anyway.

The woman, who told them her name was Mrs. Grant, was waiting outside, and a pleasant afternoon was spent under the apple-tree. They were at liberty to visit the cave as often as they liked, she told them at parting. Thereafter, it was to this hiding-place that they often made their way when pursued by Hervey and Brickwell. This was, in fact, the only use to which the cave was put, once the novelty had worn off. Sometimes Mrs.

Grant gave them tea and cakes. They voted her a jolly good sort.

For a long time Biggles had followed Smith's advice to bolt when Hervey was about, rather than risk a bullying which, administered by an expert, could be painful. But his soul revolted in ever-increasing measure from such a manoeuvre, particularly as Hervey and Brickwell usually caught him anyway. As he told Smith, it only encouraged Hervey in his bullying. Of late, too, the bullying had taken a sinister turn, one which, in Biggles'

estimation, made Hervey a downright thief. This took the form of extortion. That is to say, Hervey, having caught one of them, would demand a penny for what he called ransom money. True, a penny was not a large sum, but its loss was felt from a meagre weekly allowance. Biggles and Smith had several times bought a ball between them to

kick about, but on each occasion it had been lost when Hervey had taken it from them.

Biggles had made one attempt at retaliation, and although it failed dismally it revealed a flair for improvisation that was developed in later years. In Hertbury there was a curio shop in which the items offered for sale were strange and wonderful. The window was one of the most popular with the boys.

Gazing in it one day with Smith, Biggles remarked on a cannon ball which, described as an antique, had been picked up on the battle-field of Balaclava. With the truth of this Biggles was not concerned. What he could see was a solid ball of iron, about five inches in diameter. And as he looked at it, wondering to what practical use it could be put, there came to his mind an idea that he lost no time in conveying to his companion. It was perhaps a natural one in view of what had happened to the balls they had previously bought.

"Look at that cannon ball," said Biggles. "If Hervey kicked that he'd know all about it."

"He'd stub his toe jolly hard," agreed Smith. Let's buy it," suggested Biggles.

"What for ? "

"For Hervey to kick."

"He's not a fool. He'd spot it's an iron one." "We could paint it grey, to make it look like a tennis

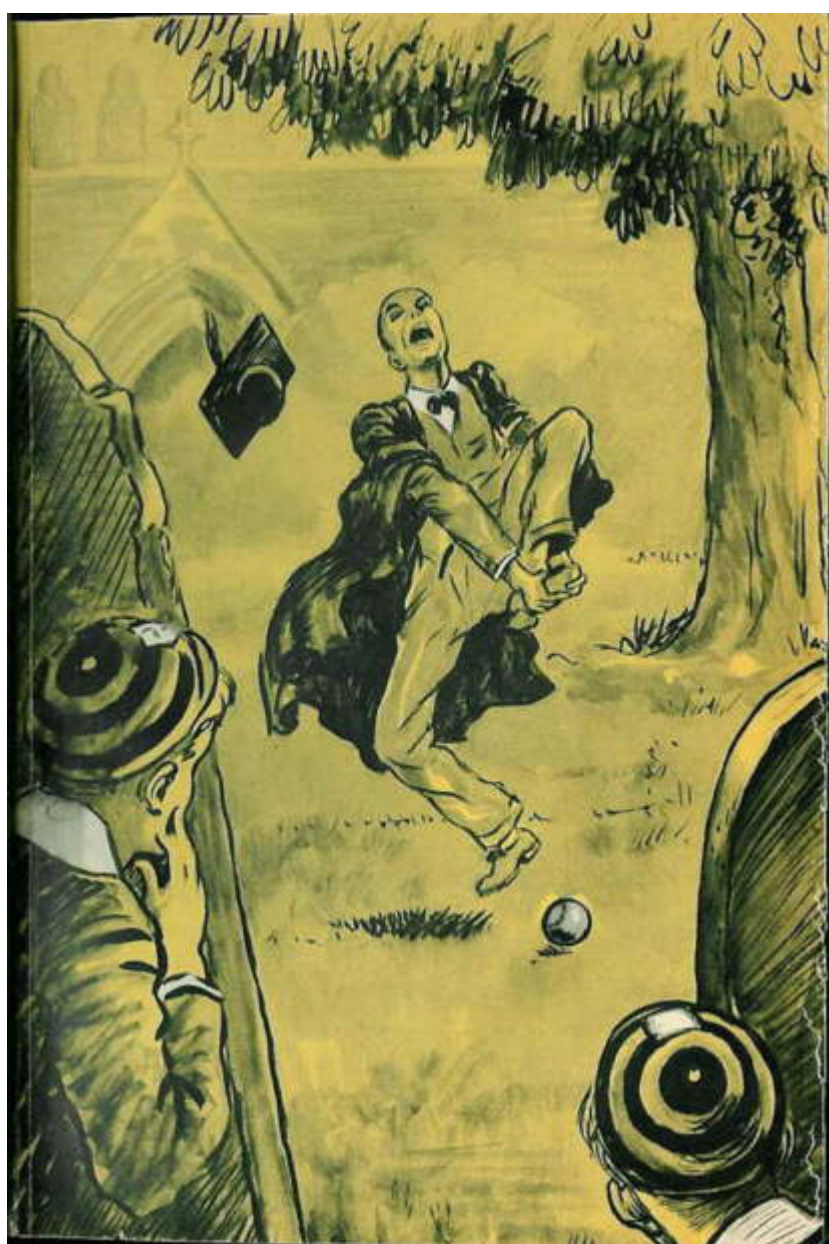
"So we could," agreed Smith thoughtfully.

The ball was marked ninepence, but the man let them have it for sixpence. Another penny spent at the ironmongers provided the paint, and when the trap was set the ball did in fact look like a tennis ball.

The spot chosen for the scheme was immediately outside the main gates of the school, where began a carriage-way through an avenue of conker trees, flanked on one side by a wall, and on the other, an ancient churchyard. On the following Saturday afternoon, at the time when Hervey and Brickwell usually emerged, the ball was set up invitingly in the middle of the drive. Biggles and Smith took up position behind convenient tombstones to watch. It had been decided that if any small boys came out they could be warned to leave the ball alone. This removed the risk of the hail being kicked by the wrong

person.

The first person to come out was Mr. Bruce. He still wore his gown and mortar-board, and was presumably taking a stroll for some fresh air. Biggles was not particularly alarmed because it seemed to him unlikely that the master would touch the ball, even if he saw it. But there is something about a ball that makes an irresistible appeal to people of all ages. It pleads, as it were, to be kicked, and the invitation is seldom ignored.



As Mr. Bruce's eyes fell on the ball his habitually rather sour expression changed to one of interest. Like a cat stalking a mouse, he lined up with it. After a quick glance around to make sure that he was not observed in a display of light-hearted abandon so far beneath his normal dignity, he hopped, took a short run, and kicked. There was a horrid thud, as of piledriver falling on a log. The ball barely moved. It rolled slowly to the grass verge.

Mr. Bruce staggered, his face twisting into a horrible grimace. His mortar-board flew off.

A deep groan broke from his lips, wrenched, it seemed, from the very bottom of his stomach. He hopped to the nearest tree and, standing on one leg with head bowed, breathing deeply and audibly, clung to it for support.

Biggles lay behind his tombstone and quaked. Smith, behind the next one, with a face the colour of the stone, appeared to be trying to dig himself into the grave.

Presently Mr. Bruce picked up his cap. With tears

in his eyes, he limped back painfully to the school gates through which he disappeared.

"Phew ! What a bit of luck he didn't see us," breathed Biggles.

"He looks awfully ill," whispered Smith, in an agitated voice. "There'll be a frightful row if he's broken his leg."

Biggles did not answer because at that moment, to his chagrin, Hervey and Brickwell came out and walked on without seeing the ball. As soon as they were out of sight he retrieved it; and not daring to be found in possession of evidence so incriminating, kicked a hole in the grass with his heel and buried it. And there, probably, it remains to this day.

Mr. Bruce limped for a week, but the reason was never disclosed.

The bullying continued.

There came a day when Biggles decided that he could stand no more of it. The pain was becoming mental as well as physical. There was no peace at all. Sitting with Smith one afternoon at the entrance of the cave, whither they had fled for refuge, he said so, and there was a ring of determination in his voice. "If it goes on our lives won't be worth living," he asserted. "Hervey will be at school for over a year yet. Why should we let him make our lives a misery ? "

"Because we can't help it," answered Smith miserably.

"We shall have to do something about it," declared Biggles.

"It's no use going to the Head," muttered Smith. "He hates sneaks."

"I never said anything about going to the Head," retorted Biggles hotly. "He told me to stand on my own feet, and that's what I'm going to do."

"How ? " asked Smith, biting at an apple. "We can't fight Hervey."

"Why not ? "

"He's too big. He and Brickwell would give us an awful hiding if we kicked. Struggling only makes them worse."

"All the same, we'll fight them," decided Biggles. "I'd as soon be killed outright as die a slow death from bruises."

"Hervey could lick us with one arm tied behind his back," stated Smith morosely.

"I'm not talking about fighting with fists," answered Biggles. "I agree that would be no use. But when an inferior force meets a superior one it must use its head."

Smith looked surprised. "Who told you that ? " " Herodotus,"

"Who's he ? "

"A chap who wrote a book."

"Never heard of him."

"He lived," said Biggles, "about two thousand years ago."

"Was he bullied ? "

"Of course. Everyone is bullied in turn." "And he used his head ? "

" Yes."

"Does that mean we've got to butt Hervey in the stomach ? "

"No. We should only get our heads punched." "What then ? "

We've got to give Hervey such a lesson that he'll leave us alone for ever afterwards."

"How can we give that big bully a lesson ? I've chalked Hervey is a cad all over the school, but it does no good."

"We shall have to arm ourselves," declared Biggles. "Then, when he thinks he's got hold of a couple of rabbits he'll find he's grabbed a couple of wolves."

"Do you mean we bite him ? "

" No."

"What then ? " Smith tossed away the core of his apple.

"We'll attack him with sticks and stones."

Smith looked startled. " But we can't do that ! " "Why not ? "

"Because that sort of thing isn't done."

"Who said it isn't done ? "

" I don't know, but it isn't."

"What is done ? "

"You're supposed to fight with your fists."

"Perhaps the people who made that rule had big fists," observed Biggles shrewdly. " If I hit Hervey with my fist I should hurt my knuckles more than I should hurt him, so that's no use."

"That's right," agreed Smith sadly. "You're new here, but I can tell you that fighting with sticks isn't playing the game."

Biggles' voice rose a shade. "Playing what game ? I'm not playing a game. I'm jolly well sick of being knocked about. Is that supposed to be a game ? If it is, Hervey always wins.

Now it's our turn."

"All I know is, if we use sticks, there'll be an awful howl."

"Yes, and it'll be Hervey who does the howling," asserted Biggles.

" He won't be ready for sticks."

"So much the better," retorted Biggles. "Are you game ? "

"If we fail we might as well go and jump under a train. We'd have an awful time."

"We have that, anyway, don't we ? "

" Yes.'

"Then we shall be no worse off," Biggles pointed out.

"All the same, I don't like the idea."

"What don't you like about it ? "

"I don't like the idea of letting him get close enough to be hit with a stick," admitted Smith frankly. "All right. Have you got a better plan ?
" "

What about blowing him up with gunpowder ? "

It was Biggles' turn to look startled. " I'm not thinking of killing him ! "

"He wouldn't necessarily die," argued Smith. "My brother was making fireworks one day when the gunpowder caught alight and burnt off all his front hair and eyebrows. Hervey would look silly without any hair."

"So should we, when the Head got to know why." "All right. What about a dog ? "

"What about a dog ? "

"Let's buy a dog and make it bite Hervey." "It might not bite him."

"We could get a ferocious one. Mick Dunnage, the poacher, has an awful brute. It was always biting people. That's why it has to be kept chained up. He might lend it to us."

" But if the brute is as ferocious as that it would start by biting us," Biggles pointed out.

"What's the use of me getting brain-waves if you're going to throw cold water on them ?

"protested Smith. "We'll have it your way if you like, but let's have a fence between us—

a barbed-wire one for preference. That would give us a chance to bolt."

"I've told you I've finished bolting," remonstrated Biggles curtly.

"All right," sighed Smith.

"If you funk it, I'll do it alone," declared Biggles grimly. "You can go on being bullied if you like."

"Brickwell will be with him. He always is."

"Then I'll take on the two of them," retorted Biggles. "You can tell my father and my uncle and the Head and all the rest of them that I died fighting. They seem to think that's the right thing to do," he added bitterly.

Smith drew a deep breath. "Now you're talking ! I'll die with you. I bet we should have a grand funeral with all the kids blubbing and Hervey will be hung for murder."

"What good would that do us if we were dead ? " inquired Biggles cynically. "If we could be there to see Hervey hung it would be worth it though."

"Yes, that's right," conceded Smith. "But it would be no use getting Hervey hung if we weren't there to watch it."

"Don't talk rot," snorted Biggles. "Are you game to help me fight Hervey, or aren't you ? "

"I'm game," agreed Smith, but without enthusiasm. "What are we going to do exactly ? "

"On Saturday afternoon we'll each find a good

cudgel. There are plenty under the conker trees. The kids use them to knock the conkers off. We'll sit outside the gates and wait for Hervey to come out. He mustn't see the cudgels till we're ready. We might fill our pockets with conkers, too."

"And when he comes out do we spring on him ? "

"No, you ass. We'll let him start it, then he'll be responsible. When he sees us he'll expect us to bolt. When we don't, he'll come for us. That's when we start. There must be no half-measures about it. We've got to give him a real fright."

"I'm frightened before we start," confessed Smith. "Never mind how frightened you are, don't let him see it," warned Biggles.

"What about getting some more chaps to help us ? suggested Smith anxiously. "The more the better, I say."

"There should be plenty of kids picking up conkers." agreed Biggles thoughtfully. "We might tell them to fill their pockets so that when they see Hervey is getting the worst of it they could pelt him."

" All right," agreed Smith. "But I bet we finish up in hospital."

" If we do, we shall at least be safe from Hervey," countered Biggles. "Come on, let's go and collect some conkers."

It all fell out much as Biggles had planned. On the following Saturday, after school, Biggles and Smith—the latter looking rather pale—sat on a heap of dead leaves close to the main gates, at some risk of being hit on the head by the sticks and stones that were being hurled into the trees by small boys in an endeavour to bring down more conkers.

Through the gates came Hervey and Brickwell. They stopped when they saw Biggles and Smith sitting there. " Come here, you brats," ordered Hervey loudly.

Biggles felt his companion shudder, as, gripping his cudgel, he answered : "Come here yourself."

Hervey's eyes opened wide with surprise. Then they narrowed. He advanced slowly, ready, as Biggles knew from experience, to make his usual rush.

"Hervey," said Biggles in a high-pitched voice, "you're not going to bully me any more.

Lay a finger on me and you'll see what happens ! "

Hervey accepted the invitation. He made his rush.

Biggles sprang up, cudgel in hand. As Hervey made a grab at him, he jumped aside and swung the weapon at Hervey's legs. It caught Hervey across the shins and brought from him a howl of pain and surprise. He hopped, yelling, clutching at his legs. Biggles waited, his face flushed, swinging the cudgel like a flail. "I warned you ! " he shouted wildly. "Come on if you want some more ! " Occasionally he made a swipe at Brickwell, who was trying to dodge Smith's cudgel. Smith was fighting like the leader of a forlorn hope.

Above the general pandemonium came the shrill yelling of excited

treble voices. Conkers began to fly, some whirling on strings. Brickwell was already backing away before the storm, and Hervey, assailed from all sides by a shower of missiles, followed. The retreat became a rout. More boys, attracted by the din, came running out, and seeing what was happening, joined in, snatching up the bouncing conkers for ammunition. The uproar, with everyone yelling at once, was terrific. War cries such as School School ! Form !

Form ! Down with the bullies ! could be heard. The business became a riot.

As the turmoil passed the outside door of the Big School the Head dashed out, but retired quickly as an unshelled conker, complete with prickles, whizzed past his nose.

But, with the appearance of the Head, the noise died as a big wave subsides when it is spent. There was a general stampede for cover, and when, presently, the Head peeped cautiously out of the door, not a soul was in sight. All that remained on the field of battle were conkers. It was not unusual to see conkers in the school yard, but it is unlikely that ever before were there so many at one time.

Biggles, like everyone else, had thought it prudent to retire. Back on the heap of leaves with Smith he grinned triumphantly. "There you are ! " he cried. "I told you they'd run ! "

The Head came bouncing through the gates. " Bigglesworth ! " he called crisply. "What was all that noise about ? "

Biggles' eyes became pools of innocence. "Noise? sir ? "

"Don't repeat my words like a parrot," snapped the Head. " I said noise. Did you hear it ? "

" Yes, I did hear something," admitted Biggles. "I think some of the boys were chasing something."

The Head gave him a long, penetrating stare. Then he turned about and disappeared.

After that, while there was plenty of scowling, there was no more bullying as far as Biggles and Smith were concerned. All the same, they took care to keep together, and they had a good selection of cudgels hidden at strategic points.

It was Biggles' destiny to win more battles later on, but it is unlikely

that any of them gave him as much satisfaction as this one.

Iv

A DAY TO REMEMBER

THE Saturday following the Battle of the Conkers was a memorable one in Biggles' life, for on that day he saw his first aeroplane. He also, quite unwittingly, established a reputation for courage which he afterwards asserted, without false modesty, was undeserved.

The aeroplane came over in the morning, during class. At first it was not recognised as such. Monsieur Bougade was on the rostrum when there became audible a deep, vibrant drone, unlike anything Biggles had ever heard. It drew nearer and nearer until it seemed to fill the classroom, and caused the boys to stare at each other in wonder.

Suddenly the door was flung open and Smalley rushed in. With scant ceremony he shouted : " Head says everyone can go out and look at the aeroplane ! "

Instantly all was confusion, books flying and desks going over as everyone made a rush for the door. Biggles went with the rest, and, standing in the quad, gazed up with an expression of awe at a winged vehicle that was moving slowly across the sky. It was possible to see the heads and shoulders of two men sitting in it.

"It's a battle-plane ! " shouted somebody.

" Don't be silly," sneered someone else. " It's an ordinary aeroplane. I've seen one before.

My father knows a man who went for a ride in one."

Excitement mounted as the aeroplane began to turn. As it made a slow circle of the school the Head came out and said : " I think it must be Morris. He's a Lieutenant in the Royal Flying Corps. He told me in a letter that he would look us up one day."

"It's Morris ! " The words flew from mouth to mouth. One or two of the older boys remembered him when he was at the school.

A hush fell as the noise of the engine ended abruptly and the nose of the aeroplane tilted down. The propeller could be seen spinning behind the engine. "He's falling ! " shouted someone.

"I think he must be coming down," said the Head. " He's going towards the cricket field."

In an instant a hundred boys were streaming towards the cricket field. The Head had been right, for when the field was reached there stood the machine, with the pilot, clad from head to foot in leather, standing beside it. He pushed up his goggles with a gauntleted hand. when he saw the boys coming. " Yes, it's Morris," said the Head, who had run to the field with the rest.

For a little while the Head stood and talked to the old Maltonian, while the boys stood in a circle at a respectful distance trying to hear what the super-man had to say.

Said Biggles to Smith, in a tone of veneration : " It must be wonderful to be able to do that."

"Yes," agreed Smith reverently. "Those chaps must be jolly brave. You wouldn't catch me going up in one of those things, I can tell you."

"Why not ? " inquired Biggles.

Smith looked at him curiously. "Do you mean you'd go up if you got the chance ? "

"I can't think of anything I'd like to do more," replied Biggles, simply.

"Yes, and suppose you fell out, what then ? " sneered Smith.

"I should be killed," admitted Biggles.

The pilot waved to the boys and climbed back into his seat.

"Stand away, everybody ! " shouted the Head.

The engine roared again, the wind from the propeller sending caps flying. After bumping for a little way the machine left the ground, and, climbing slowly, disappeared from view.

"Everyone back to school now ! " cried the Head.

Deep in thought, Biggles made his way back to his desk. In his heart had been born an ambition, but at that moment its achievement seemed as far away as the moon. He was not to know, on that sunny autumn morning, how much of his life he was to spend doing what then seemed an impossible attainment.

His second adventure of the day occurred in the afternoon. To him it was the lesser of the two.

As he stepped out into the quad after dinner, he was at once aware of an atmosphere of excitement. Normally, at that hour only a few boys would have been about, but now the whole school seemed to be moving in a crowd towards the main gates, with a lot of loud talking, as if everyone was bent on a definite errand.

Biggles ran after the crowd to discover what was afoot. Finding Smith, he asked : "What

s going on ? "

"There's a bear," answered Smith, vaguely, in a voice shrill with anticipation. " Come on.

Let's go and see it."

"A bear ! " exclaimed Biggles, who, having seen plenty, both tame and wild, saw in this no reason for excitement. " What sort of bear ? "

"A dancing bear."

" Where is it ? "

" In the town. It belongs to an Arab."

"Don't talk rot," sneered a voice. " He's not an Arab, he's a Turk."

" Hark at him," chipped in another voice. "He's an Afghan. I've seen a picture of one."

" Bosh ! The man's an Indian," said someone else.

"They say he's got the bear on a pole, so it can't get at you," contributed Smith, comfortingly, as the general move towards the gate was continued. " It's an enormous brute, they say," he added.

" Who says ? "

" Somebody—I don't know," admitted Smith. " Lipscombe says it's at least ten feet high."

Biggles turned to the boy named. "Have you seen it ? " he asked.

"Then how do you know ? " inquired Biggles. "Don't be funny, it

doesn't suit you," was the retort.

The entire procession of boys was now moving through the gates, bound for the town and its visitor. It did not go far. It had got about half-way down the conker avenue when from the opposite direction, cap in hand, head back and elbows in his sides, running like a hare, appeared the small boy, Page. So fast was he travelling that his legs appeared to twinkle, throwing up behind them a wake of dead leaves. As he drew near it became evident that he was beside himself with excitement. In a face as white as chalk his eyes were round and staring. Drawing still nearer, he burst into hysterical shouting. "Cave I Cave ! Run for your lives ! It's coming I" He did not stop, or even slow down, until some boys grabbed him.

"What's coming ? " asked somebody.

"The bear," gasped Page. " It's escaped. Its eyes are bloodshot and it's foaming at the mouth." The boy tore himself clear and raced, hair on end, towards the school. It was clear that whether the bear had escaped or not he had lost all desire to see it.

There was a brief hesitation in which everyone in the crowd talked at once. It was followed by a general withdrawal, slow at first, but fast gathering impetus. It ended in a panic flight in which several small boys were knocked down. They were soon on their feet again, and, without waiting to pick up their caps, sped on.

Biggles stood still. Smith stayed with him, several yards nearer the school, and with reluctance judging from his attitude, which was that of a runner waiting for the pistol to start a sprint. " Come on," he urged. "What are you waiting for ? Do you want to be torn to pieces and eaten ? "

"Eaten by a tame bear ? " Biggles laughed scornfully. " I used to have one once, but it was only a cub."

At this stage of the affair another boy burst into view. He came round the corner so fast that in his swerve to straighten out into the avenue he collided with a tree with such violence that he spun like a top. By a miracle he kept his feet, and without pause came on as if nothing had happened.

Biggles opened his arms and caught him. "Wait a minute ! "he cried. "What's the matter

? "

"The bear," panted the boy, straining at his arm. "It's escaped. It's coming. It's rushing about, roaring and killing people. They're going to shoot it."

why ?

The boy's jaw dropped.

Why ? Because it's a

bear. Let me go ! "

"How did it escape ? " demanded Biggles.

"It was dancing in the street when the baker's van came along. When the horse saw the bear it shied. The man holding the bear was knocked down. They've taken him to the doctor's. The bear ran away. I saw the whole thing. It was frightful. The police and people are out with guns to shoot the bloodthirsty beast." The words poured out in a spate. The boy's eyes never left the direction from which he had come.

"What colour is this bear ? " asked Biggles.

" Brown."

"How big is it ? "

"Enormous. Three times as big as a man. Let me go ! " The boy jerked his arm free and ran on towards the school gates, which, having been closed, were opened for a moment to let him in. Biggles could see a line of white faces peering through the iron bars.

"What a confounded shame ! " he said indignantly. "What's a shame ? " asked Smith, watching the drive.

"To shoot the poor old bear."

"What else can they do with it ? "

" Catch it, of course."

"Catch it ? " Smith looked incredulous. "Who's going to catch a ravening, bloodthirsty bear ? "

Biggles smiled condescendingly. " Bloodthirsty ! " he scoffed. " It's a tame bear. I've seen plenty in India. I'll bet it's an ordinary brown

bear. The wretched beast has probably been standing in crowds all its life, making a fool of itself to amuse a lot of bigger fools.

I should say its scared out of it's wits by this time."

"I don't care what sort of bear it is," said Smith coldly. "A bear's a bear," he added, with undeniable logic. "I'm going back to school."

"I'm going to catch the poor beast before some silly ass shoots it," declared Biggles, and walked on.

From the school gate came a great shout of warning, but he ignored it. He could hear Smith screaming : "He's going to catch the bear ! He's going to capture it with his bare hands ! "

The road to the town was deserted. So, too, was the town when he reached it, although there were terrified faces at every window. Voices shouted warnings. The word" bear"

echoed from street to street. Biggles took no notice. Reaching the baker's shop, he stopped. The door was locked. He knocked. A distraught woman let him in. Biggles put three pennies on the counter. "Three pennyworth of buns, please," he ordered. " I'll have stale ones if I can have more."

With trembling hands the woman put some buns in a bag. "Surely you're not going back out there ? " she breathed.

"Which way did the bear go ? "inquired Biggles. "Up the Hayford Road," whispered the woman, as if afraid that the animal might hear her.

"Thank you," said Biggles and, going out, set off at a trot on the trail of the bear. He had the street to himself, except for a man on one knee behind a lamp-post, a gun at the ready. "There's a mad bear up there ! " shouted the man.

" I don't wonder it's mad," replied Biggles contemptuously.

Leaving the houses behind him, he walked on up the Hayford Road. He saw a man, with a rifle, in a tree. Another was crouching in a ditch. Both shouted to him to go back. They were, they said, going to shoot the bear.

"Mind you don't shoot me," Biggles told them seriously, for he saw

there was some risk of this. He walked on, now keeping a sharp look-out for the animal.

He had gone less than half a mile when he came upon it. It was, as he suspected, an ordinary brown bear. Standing against the hedge, it was apparently eating blackberries.

The pole still dangled from its muzzle. It looked round when it heard Biggles coming, regarded him for a moment without interest, and then resumed its harmless occupation.

Biggles walked on, slowly now, towards it. The bear took no notice until he was about twenty yards away, when it ceased munching for a moment while it had a good look at him.

Biggles spoke gently. " Hello, Bruin, what are you doing ?—having a day off ? I don't blame you."

The bear, ignoring the remark, bit off a cluster of wild rose-hips and chewed them with evident satisfaction.

When Biggles took the paper bag from under his arm, causing it to rustle, the bear became interested. It was apparent that it knew what paper bags sometimes contained.

Dropping on all fours, it shuffled towards the object of its interest. Biggles tossed a bun.

The bear caught it with the adroitness of long practice and ate it noisily. The bun finished, it came nearer.

"They were going to shoot you," Biggles told it as he tossed another bun and the performance was repeated. Bear and boy were now only a couple of yards apart. Biggles, talking all the time in a low voice, held out the next bun. The bear reared up, took it carefully from his fingers with its paws and conveyed it to its mouth. Biggles picked up the pole. The bear made no protest. Indeed, with its eyes on the bag, it appeared not to notice the movement.

Biggles still had one bun left, and this he broke into small pieces before parting with it.

When it had been consumed, he rolled the bag into a ball to show that it was empty. The bear sniffed it to satisfy itself on the point.

"Come on, old man, it's time you came home," said Biggles. " If you

stay here you'll get hurt." Turning, he walked back the way he had come, the bear following obediently. In the distance he could see a crowd that stretched across the road from side to side. When he reached the man in the tree the man shouted to him to stand aside, as he was going to shoot the bear.

Biggles' anger was genuine when he answered. "What's the matter with you ? Can't you see the animal is as docile as a lamb ? It's got a lot more sense than you have." He



walked on.

When he reached the crowd, which, he observed, contained a number of boys from the school, it gave way before him. Only one man stood his ground, and that was the Head.

He, too, had a rifle, and seemed to be in a state of considerable agitation. Indeed, his first words confirmed this. "Bear, what are you

doing with that boy ? " he cried. He corrected himself quickly above the titter. "Boy, what do you think you are doing with that bear ? "

" Doing with it, sir ? "returned Biggles wonderingly. "Don't repeat what I say," thundered the Head. "I'm rescuing it from a crowd of bloodthirsty humans," said Biggles simply.

" Put it down."

" But I've nowhere to put it, sir," complained Biggles.

" Then release it."

"But if I let it go it won't know what to do," protested Biggles. " If it bolts there'll be a stampede and then someone'll be hurt."

"Do as you're told, boy."

" Let me put it in a stable somewhere," pleaded Biggles. " You can see it's perfectly harmless. It'll

do anything I tell it. Watch." Turning, he threw up a hand and began to sing a song in Hindi.

At once the bear rose up on its hind legs and began to dance.

There was a roar of delight from the crowd, whereupon Biggles danced a few steps himself before turning back to the Head. " You see, sir ! " he cried. " Has nobody got a biscuit for the poor old bear ? "

" I've got a caramel," said Smith, stepping forward.

"That'll do," replied Biggles. "Give it to him. He won't hurt you."

"Not me. You can give it to him," returned Smith, and held out the sweet.

Biggles put it in the bear's mouth, which brought more applause from the crowd.

How the affair was to end was still in doubt, but while the bear was still dribbling over the sticky caramel, a coloured man, with his head swathed in bandages, pushed his way through the throng. Laughing with relief, he ran to the bear and put his arm round its neck. The bear licked his ear—to another burst of applause. When the union had been effected Biggles handed over the pole to its rightful owner and turned away.

The Head gave him a curious look, and with his rifle at the slope bounced away towards the school.

Biggles, surrounded by boys clamouring to be told the details of the encounter, accompanied the bear back to the town, where it was housed in a barn which its master had hired for the purpose. The man, it turned out, was from India, and they had a talk before Biggles departed with the man's blessing for saving his bear, which was his only means of livelihood.

The matter concluded, Biggles had an ovation that made him blush.

"That boy's got nerve to tackle a savage beast like that single-handed," said a man in the crowd.

"Pah ! Savage !" sneered Hervey, who had now appeared on the scene. "Why, the brute'

s as tame as an old sheep."

"Then, why didn't you catch it instead of bolting back to school ?"
"inquired Biggles.

Hervey scowled and took a step forward. But, whatever he intended doing, he thought better of it. Turning, he strode away, while several small boys, well hidden in the crowd, took up the chant, "Hervey is a funk."

The excitement over, the crowd dispersed its several ways. Biggles walked back to school accompanied by Smith, and escorted by a swarm of admiring boys of the lower forms.

The day ended on a tragic note. After evening prayers the Head stood up and cleared his throat. "Those of you who knew Morris, or saw his aeroplane this morning, will be sorry to learn that he was killed shortly after leaving us when his aeroplane fell out of control into a wood." With that, the Head turned away quickly, took the steps to the floor in one stride and disappeared through the swing doors, leaving the boys to gaze at each other with horrified eyes.

Smith came over to Biggles. "There you are," he said earnestly, in a low voice, "What did I tell you ? "

"I'd still go up if I had the chance," returned Biggles.

THE FIELD DAY

ANOTHER incident that occurred about this time must be recorded because it was Biggles' first essay in the art of war, and although not everyone shared his view, he was satisfied with it. Whatever opinions may have been at the time, the affair reveals, at all events, that even at this early age Biggles possessed that faculty for stratagem which was to be displayed to a greater extent in the years to come. A tendency towards individual effort, in which he afterwards excelled, rather than acceptance of the role of a small cog in a big machine, is also to be observed.

As stated earlier, there was at the school a cadet corps to which every boy and master had to belong, for it was the Head's own creation and had become his pride and joy. He was, of course, the commanding officer, and obviously took a delight in demonstrating his knowledge of the military matters he had acquired when he himself was a soldier. At least one half day a week was devoted to drill, and for the last hour of Saturday morning it was his custom to lecture the whole school on the art of war, as approved at that time by the War Office. He laid stress constantly on the initiative which the British soldier possessed. "A soldier without initiative," he was fond of saying, "is a mere machine."

The class ended with the singing of the school marching song which the Head himself had composed.

The uniform was as simple and inexpensive as could be devised, consisting of a navy blue sweater, blue breeches, blue puttees and black boots. The headgear was a blue forage cap. The accoutrements were a white belt, with two ammunition pouches (which were never used for anything but carrying sweets) and a dummy rifle made of wood. On the shoulders, in white letters, in the form of a semi-circle, was the cypher M.H.S. O.T.C.

, which stood for Malton Hall School, Officers' Training Corps. There were, it must be admitted, two real service rifles in the Head's study that were sometimes used by the older boys for target practice on the local Volunteer rifle range.

Biggles was in the cadet corps with the rest, and it was with anything but pleasure that he looked forward to the weekly drill parade, which he held to be largely a waste of time and energy. The customary procedure was for the four companies of twenty-five boys each to parade in the quad, where a slow and extremely boring inspection

took place.

The troops, each company under a master who for the time being became an officer, then marched to the football field, where two hours was spent quick marching, slow marching, double marching, lying down, getting up, and marching on again. Afterwards the troops came home at the double to prove they were not tired. All this Biggles suffered in silence as part of the price he had to pay for his education.

The Head took it seriously, but few of the boys shared his enthusiasm. To most of them it was a silly game played for the Head's amusement. None could guess that within a few years most of them would be doing these things in grim earnest on the war-stricken fields of Flanders ; or that before the First World War was over nearly a third of them were to die on that same battlefield. The O.T.C. was not, of course, confined to Mahon Hall. Every school of any size in the country had its O.T.C., and after the war was over each could show a similar melancholy record.

But to return to Biggles. He became interested, although not by any means enthusiastic, when one day the Head announced that the Corps had been accorded a great honour. The Volunteers were having a Field Day, and he had obtained permission for the school corps to take part. There was a scheme, as there had to be in field manoeuvres, and he went on to explain it. The great thing, he said, was to make the exercise as much like the real thing as possible.

This struck Biggles as a little odd, for he could not see how the scheme could be realistic if each side knew beforehand what the other side was going to do. However, he said nothing.

As he understood it the general idea was this. At a given time a convoy would advance down the road from Hertbury to Wanton, a distance of about five miles. The purpose of the convoy was to get through to Wanton with an imaginary load of stores and ammunition for imaginary troops besieged there. As there were no troops to spare, this convoy would be only a " token" force, consisting simply of a horse-drawn covered van carrying a large orange flag. It would be under the control of Colour Sergeant Buckle, the local recruiting sergeant, and to help it to get through it would be defended by a battalion of Volunteers known as Red Force. To prevent it from getting through would be the task of another battalion known as Blue Force. The Cadet Corps would be attached to the attacking force ; that is, Blue Force.

The success or failure of the convoy would be judged by a number of umpires, senior regular officers who would be identified by white armlets. They would, on their horses, watch the progress of the battle. Chief among them would be General Cauldwell himself, from the War Office. It would be, said the Head, a most interesting experience, and they were very lucky to be allowed to take part. It was necessary that every boy should do his best to make the thing a success by using his initiative. They were to remember that the General himself would be watching.

Excitement mounted as the great day drew near, although this, Biggles suspected, was largely due to the fact that it meant missing a day in school. Anything was better than school.

The day dawned clear and bright, and there was nearly as much excitement in the school as if the Corps had really been ordered out on active service. Rations, consisting of sandwiches, were to be carried in haversacks, and water bottles, borrowed from the barracks, would be filled. This gave the project a final touch of realism, and when the company stood to attention on parade, Biggles, with a supply of acid drops in one pouch, and an apple in the other, was determined that the convoy should not get through.

A tall fair boy named Curtiss, who was shortly going into the Guards, had supplemented his equipment with a repeating pistol that fired caps. Of this he was obviously very proud, for he had been rushing about

shouting " Charge ! " and blazing away at an imaginary foe at some risk of running out of ammunition before the battle started. This picture was to flash back into Biggles' mind when, five years later, he read in the London Gazette, in a citation of the award of the Victoria Cross, of how Captain Lionel Curtiss, Grenadier Guards, had died on the Somme at the head of his men in a gallant attempt to regain a lost position.

The corps marched off, with the Head bouncing along in front, his old regimental badge flashing in the sun. Little Page, the drummer, kept the troops in step with his drum.

They went through the town at the double, to show they were no ordinary foot-sloggers, and when the shopkeepers came out to watch, Biggles began to feel that there was something in being a soldier after all.

At the far side of the town, on a grass field, drawn up in lines, stood the two forces of Volunteers that were to oppose each other in the manoeuvres. There, too, near the road, stood the "convoy" with its large, orange flag. Conspicuous near it in the scarlet uniform of the Militia, was Colour Sergeant Buckle, a rather short but broad, virile-looking man, with the ends of his moustache as stiff and sharp as bayonet points. A red, white and blue rosette was pinned to the side of his cap. He was very much on his toes, as if to remind the troops that he was a "regular" while they were only amateurs. It fascinated Biggles to see the way his joints worked ; they might have been fitted with springs. Even more imposing were the umpires, on horseback, important-looking officers, some of whom had gold on the peaks of their caps. The General was with them, easily distinguished by his red lapels.

There was a good deal of activity. Officers hurried about. Some stood in groups pouring over maps.

"Are your men ready, Colonel Chase ? " called the General loudly.

The Head saluted smartly. "All ready, sir."

There was a flutter of excitement as the General's trumpeter blew a call. The convoy moved off, its orange standard flying bravely. Biggles watched it go, for it was the enemy he was now determined to wipe out.

Orders were shouted. Troops sprang to attention, sloped arms, and began to move off to the positions allotted to them. The convoy was now on the road, and the defending force, to Biggles surprise, instead of marching with it, began to deploy on either flank at a considerable distance from it.

After a final conversation with the officer commanding Blue Force, the Head, more business-like than Biggles had ever seen him, called the corps to attention. Taking his place at the head of the column he led his troops in the direction opposite from the one taken by the convoy.

This, to Biggles, was all very puzzling. There was the convoy in plain view, yet nobody was attempting to interfere with it. He had not the remotest idea of where they were going, or what they were going to do. He thought the Head might have told them instead of keeping the information to himself. Not knowing made things very boring. The rest of Blue Force was already a long way off, moving in an entirely different direction. They were going away from the convoy instead of

towards it. Biggles could not imagine what they were going to do.

The next hour brought no change in the situation, and Smith agreed with Biggles that war was a dreary business. He was glad, he said, that he had remembered to put some sherbet in his water. Biggles crunched an acid drop. "We seem to be getting farther away from everything," he observed moodily.

"Stop that talking in the ranks ! "shouted the Head.

An umpire galloped past, as if on a definite errand. He did not stop. The march continued across a seemingly endless succession of ploughed fields. Biggles' interest was definitely on the wane. His instinct about soldiering had been right, he decided.

However, when at last the Head halted his corps in a wood and started to make his dispositions, the thing once more began to show promise. Boys were called to the front, given their orders, and moved off. Biggles was detailed to be a scout, and by good fortune, Smith with him. Their particular duty was to go on to a copse on some high ground in the distance and watch for the convoy. Nothing was said about what they were to do if they saw it. However, that was a minor point, thought Biggles, as with Smith beside him, his wooden rifle at the trail," he set off at a trot.

Reaching the copse they sat down. "That's better," said Smith. " Now we can talk and eat our sandwiches. I'm glad I brought sherbet. It's better than plain water, don't you think ? "

Biggles did think so.

There was not a soul in sight, either in the fields or on the road, which could be seen some three hundred yards below, where it entered a cutting with high hedges on either side. It was all very quiet. Not a shot had so far been fired, which was most disappointing, Biggles thought, because there had been a rumour that the Volunteers were to be issued with blank cartridges. " I call this pretty dull," he remarked.

"Don't worry. We're all right here, where no one can see us," said Smith. " I vote we stay here all day."

Half an hour passed with nothing to break the monotony. Not a soldier could be seen.

"If you ask me," remarked Smith, " I'd say we've been forgotten. It's probably all over by now. I suppose that is the right road down there ?

"

" It's the only one, so it must be," replied Biggles. In his heart he agreed with Smith.

Something had gone wrong without a doubt, otherwise there would have been some attacking or defending by now.

"How long are you going to stay here ? " asked Smith, getting up and starting to pick blackberries.

"I don't know," admitted Biggles.

"I suppose we came to the right place ? "

"I thought so when we came here, but I'm beginning to wonder."

Smith changed the subject. He pointed. "They look like chestnut trees over there. What about going over and getting some ? "

"I think we ought to stay a bit longer," demurred Biggles. " After all, we don't want to miss the battle."

"What battle ? " inquired Smith, excusably perhaps. "There isn't any battle. I'll bet everyone's got fed up and gone home."

Biggles sprang to his feet, staring. " Look ! " he exclaimed. "Here comes the convoy ! "

He pointed to the vehicle with the orange flag, which now appeared on Ae road, moving slowly in their direction.

"There doesn't seem to be anybody defending it," observed Smith.

"There doesn't seem to be anybody attacking it, either," returned Biggles.

"Shall we fire on it ? " asked Smith, getting his rifle ready.

"What's the use ? We've nothing to fire," Biggles pointed out. "The sergeant wouldn't know we were shooting at him." Then he stiffened under a wave of inspiration. "I say, Smith, I've got an idea ! "

"You have ? "

" Yes."

"A good one ? "

"Jolly good."

" What is it ? "

"Let's capture the convoy."

Smith frowned. "Is that allowed ? "

"What do you mean—is it allowed ? It's there to be captured, and aren't we part of the attacking force ? "

"That's what I thought," admitted Smith.

"Very well, then. Why shouldn't we capture the enemy's flag ? "

"Would that be playing the game ? "

"Playing what game ? "came back Biggles irritably. "You're always talking about playing the game. We aren't playing a game ; we're at war."

"All right. You know best. But what about the sergeant ? He'll cuff our ears if we try to push him off."

Biggles did not deny it. He thought it more than probable. "The thing to do," he declared,

"is to get him to leave the cart of his own free will."

"Why should he do that ? "

"We'll make him."

" How ? "

"I'll tell you," said Biggles. "We'll go down to the road, to that place where it disappears through those banks."

"Then what ? "

"You go into the bushes on the far side, and when the cart gets level, let out a howl as though you were being murdered."

" What for ? "

"To make the sergeant jump off the cart, you ass. He'll rush to your

rescue."

"And what are you going to do ? "

I shall jump on the cart and drive it away."

Smith whistled softly. "By gum ! I say, that is an idea ! " Then a doubt seemed to strike him. "Wait a minute, though. What's going to happen to me ? "

"You can kill the sergeant."

"Kill him ? "

"Not really, of course. What you do is point your rifle at his face and shout, 'Hands up ! ' "

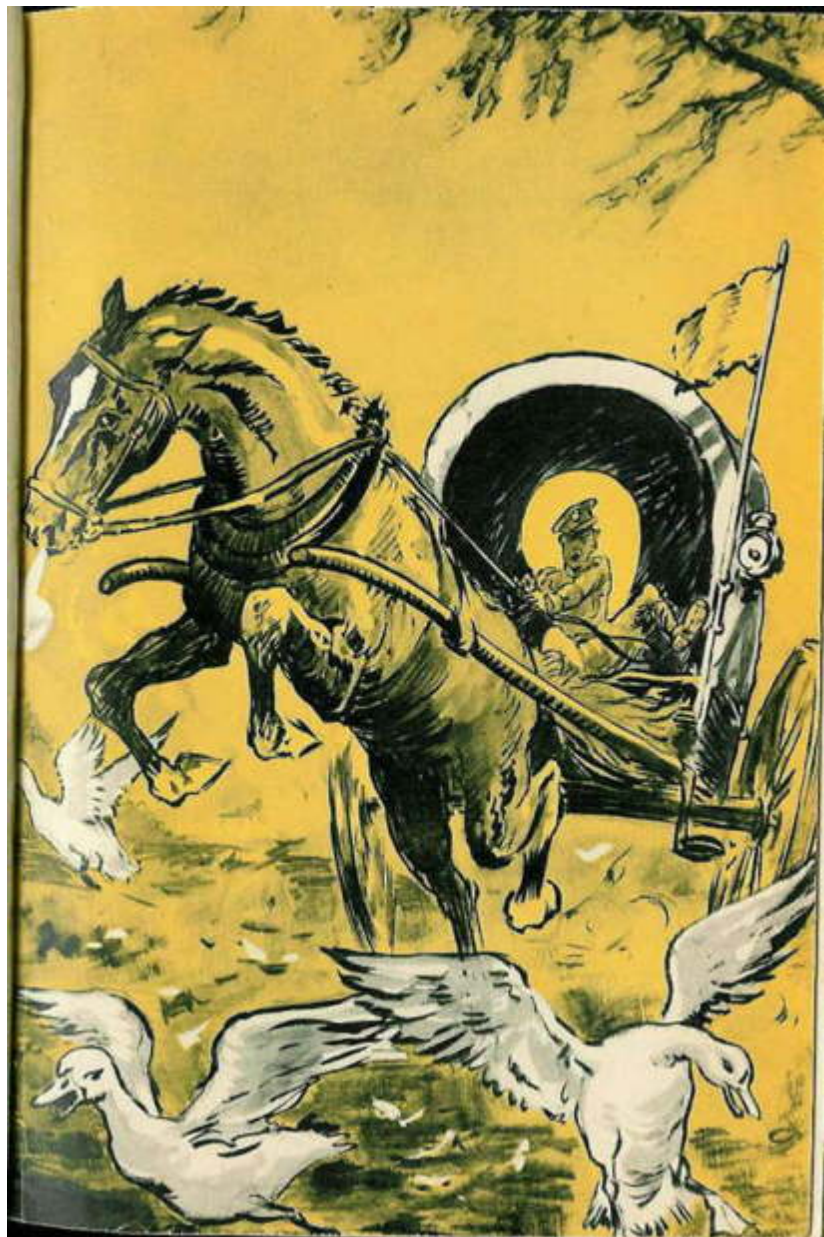
Then he'll surrender."

"Suppose he doesn't ? Suppose he clouts me ? "

"He wouldn't be such a cad as to do that," declared Biggles. "You tell him he's dead, and if he's anything like a sport he ought to jolly well stay dead. Unless he's an absolute rotter he will."

"All right," agreed Smith dubiously. "I suppose someone has to make sacrifices in a war."

They set off. Reaching the hedge that bounded the road, Biggles found a place to hide.



Smith went over

and disappeared into the bushes on the far side. The cart was still coming on, slowly.

Biggles could see the Colour Sergeant, rosette in cap, sitting on the seat with the reins looped over a hook, smoking a pipe. His pointed waxed moustache gave him a very fierce expression. Biggles hoped

that Smith would not see him until he had groaned, or he might change his mind.

This hope, apparently, was fulfilled. As the cart drew level there burst from the bushes a hollow moan of such heart-rending quality that Biggles half rose, fearing that Smith had really met with an accident. Again came the sound, pitched on a higher note, and followed by the words, " Help ! Help ! " Biggles mentally congratulated Smith on his brilliant acting.

The sergeant behaved like the man of action that he was. In the matter of speed, nothing that Biggles could have imagined was to be compared with reality. "Whoa, mare ! " he cried, and reaching the road in a bound, plunged into the bushes.

Biggles made a flying leap into the vacated seat, took the reins and grabbed the whip.

Subconsciously he heard Smith say "Hands up ! " but the words were followed instantly by a yelp of pain that gave him reason to fear that Smith's objections had been fully justified by the event. But there were bound to be casualties in war, he thought, as in his excitement he gave the unsuspecting horse a cut with the whip. He had only intended to crack it.

The horse responded nobly. In fact, it responded too well. It bolted.

Biggles bounced in his seat, but hung on to the

reins, shouting " Whoa ! Whoa ! " But he might as well have saved his breath for all the effect this had. The horse went on at full gallop, terrified now, it seemed, by the noise it was itself making. Biggles clung to the seat, waiting for an end that now seemed inevitable. Behind him a cloud of dust rose high into the air.

He was probably lucky. So was an old man who came round a corner on a bicycle.

Seeing what was coming he rode into the hedge and Biggles saw him no more. An old woman, filling buckets from a well, nearly fell into it as a wheel missed her by inches. A dog, asleep in the road outside a farm, also had a narrow escape. A line of ducks, waddling in single file from one side of the road to the other, disappeared in a cloud of feathers.

The horse only slowed down and finally stopped when its strength was

spent, by which time it had covered, as near as Biggles could judge, about three miles. The animal began to graze, while Biggles, weak from shock, mopped a sweating face with trembling hands.

Actually, he was elated by the success of his plan, even though the way in which it had worked out was not entirely what he had visualised. However, he had no intention of losing what he had captured at so much risk to life and limb, so taking the bridle he led the now passive horse through a gate to a convenient field barn, where he tied it to a staple in the wall. He tore the flag from its pole, tucked it under his jersey, and returning to the road, set off back the way he had come, feeling that the day had been worth while after all.

The long walk back was tiresome, particularly as he had to avoid several groups of people who were standing about, obviously discussing the runaway. He had gone about half way when he had a fright. Rounding a corner he came suddenly face to face with the Colour Sergeant, looking very hot and very angry. Biggles realised at once that the soldier was looking for what he had lost, a contingency for which he, Biggles, should have been prepared, but was not.

The Sergeant's first words implied that he did not recognise Biggles as the cause of his discomfiture. Nor did he by any gesture indicate that he regarded him as an enemy. "

Hello, sonny," he said cheerfully. "Did you see a runaway horse down the road ? "

Biggles levelled his rifle. "Hands up ! " he said smartly, "Quick, or you're a dead man ! "

The Colour Sergeant looked surprised. "Oh, I am, am I? "

"Yes, you are."

" Who says so ? "

" I say so."

The sergeant's answer was to make a rush at him. But Biggles, now an expert in the art of dodging, slipped under his arms and ran on up the road. When he had reached a safe distance he turned and shouted :
"Why don't you play the game ? You've been killed twice over ! "

The sergeant ignored the taunt. "Have you seen the convoy ? " he

demanded.

" Yes."

" Where is it ? "

" It's in a barn about two miles down the road." " Who put it there ? "

"I did," boasted Biggles, pulling up his jersey to show the flag.

The sergeant swore horribly, shaking his fist.

" You're a rotten cad," was Biggles' final jibe, as he went on.

It was nearly half an hour later before he came upon any signs of military activity, and then there was plenty. All the troops engaged in the operation, including the O.T.C., were standing at ease in a field beside the road. The officers were together, talking. A little to one side were the umpires, dismounted, with soldiers holding their horses. The Head, and the two colonels commanding the Volunteers, were with them. The General was striking his leg with his riding crop.

Biggles joined his unit. No one took any notice of him, which was rather disappointing, because he had expected a different reception. After all, had he not, almost single-handed, captured the convoy ? Perhaps they were unaware of that, he thought. He found Smith, sitting holding his ear, and trying to strike a cheerful note, inquired : " How did you get on ? "

Smith regarded him with disfavour. "How do you think ? "he growled.

"What happened ? "

"I said 'hands up' but he didn't stop. When I said 'you're a dead man' he snarled like a wild beast and fetched me a clip that knocked me backwards. Look at my ear." Smith removed the hand to reveal a swollen ear the colour of a tomato.

"I told him he was a cad," said Biggles consolingly. "That's the trouble," he went on. "

Some people won't play the game."

"I heard bugles blowing so I came back here," concluded Smith.

Biggles looked around. "What's going on, exactly ? " he asked.

A boy sitting near answered. "Something's happened to the convoy. They say the exercise can't go on without it."

Biggles realised then that what he suspected was true. No one had noticed his exploit.

That was why there had been no congratulations. Clearly, it was time the Head knew about it, so that he could claim the honour for his regiment. He walked over to where the Head was still talking to the umpires and saluted with military precision.

The Head glanced round, looking not at all pleased by the interruption. "Yes, boy, what is it ?" asked crisply.

"I thought you might like to know, sir, that I captured the convoy," answered Biggles.

The Head spun round. "You—what ?" he inquired, in a queer, strained sort of voice.

It seemed to Biggles that the Head had not fully grasped the fact. "With the help of Smith tertius I captured the convoy, sir," he repeated.

There was an embarrassing silence, and for the first time Biggles had an uneasy suspicion that something had gone wrong.

"And who told you to capture the convoy ?" inquired the Head coldly.

Biggles looked surprised. "Told me, sir ? I thought that was the idea. You said a good soldier used his initiative and that

"Silence, boy !" The Head seemed to have

difficulty in speaking. "Where have you put

it ?"

"My initiative, sir ?"

"No, you little ass. The convoy. Don't you realise that without the convoy we can't go on

? "

Biggles was cut to the quick. This was the thanks he got for doing what he was told to do. All that he had suspected of soldiering was

now confirmed.

"Where is the convoy now ? " demanded the Head sternly.

" I put it in a barn, sir, about three miles down the road."

" Three miles ! "

"I brought the enemy standard with me, sir," said Biggles, producing the orange flag and dropping it at the Head's feet. " Smith tertius helped me to get it and was wounded in the action," he added.

The Head looked at the crumpled flag. Then he turned to the umpires. " I'm very sorry, gentlemen," he said apologetically, "but there's nothing more I can say."

"Well, that puts an end to the exercise," remarked one of the umpires. " By the time we can get the convoy back it will be getting dark." He looked at Biggles. "Where is the sergeant in charge of the convoy ? "

" He's dead, sir," reported Biggles. " Smith tertius shot him at point blank range. But he wouldn't play the game. After he was dead he struck Smith on the ear."

The General, who had half turned away, blew his nose loudly.

"Why did the sergeant leave the convoy at all ? " inquired another umpire.

" We employed a ruse to persuade him to dismount, sir."

The General spoke. "All right, Colonel Chase. We'll call the operation off. You can march your men off, but I'll have a word with you before you go."

The Head turned to Biggles and barked, " Dismiss ! "

Biggles saluted stiffly and marched off. ,

The General watched him go. "That boy should go far, Chase, unless he gets killed early in his career, as seems probable. What's his name ? "

" Bigglesworth, sir."

"Any relation of Brigadier General Bigglesworth ? " Nephew, sir."

The General's eyes twinkled. " Ah ! That probably accounts for it."

As Biggles rejoined his company it became clear that word of his exploit had leaked out.

But there was still no congratulations. As he passed across the front of one of the Volunteer companies, someone said : "That's the kid who spoils the bloomin' outing."

Biggles held his chin high and did not deign to reply.

The march home was a sombre affair. The school marching song was struck up, but Biggles' lips remained closed. He was thinking, and his thoughts were bitter. He was quite sure now that he was not cut out to be a soldier.

The Head did not refer to the matter again ; but at the next lecture, when he mentioned initiative, he observed—looking at Biggles—that it should always be used with discretion.

VI

ALL THE FUN OF THE FAIR

THERE was also an unfortunate affair about this time which, while somewhat disreputable, had a certain educational value, although it is unlikely that Biggles considered it from that angle. His brain was now as flexible as it would ever be ; it absorbed knowledge easily, and on it all natural emotions made an impact that were bound to have a lasting effect. Of these, indignation was one, and in this respect the Fair taught him a lesson that he never forgot. Up to this time he had assumed that all men were reasonably honest, for he had no experience to the contrary. The folly of such an ingenuous belief was now revealed.

The fair was, in actual fact, a rather squalid company of gipsies that travelled from town to town and once a year made a three-day stay at Hertbury. While it was there it made the night hideous with noise, and when it departed it left a trail of petty theft and a litter of waste paper that took weeks to clear up. The fair also took with it all the copper coins of the district, to the annoyance of the local tradesmen, who for weeks afterwards were hard put to find small change. For these reasons the Town Council had more than once tried to put a stop to this undesirable visitation, but had failed on the grounds that it was an old-established privilege.

It was always held on the same field, namely, a

three-acre area of waste land known as the Sheep Pens. No doubt there had been sheep pens there at one time, but of these no trace remained. The wood, so old men averred, had been used by the gipsies to light their fires.

The fair announced its coming some time before it actually arrived by a blight of flamboyant posters which appeared overnight on gateposts, trees, fences, and even dwelling houses—on everything, in fact, on which one could be stuck. These remained for months afterwards to disfigure the landscape, until the weather peeled them off.

When new they were very bright, and made the ambitious claim of representing the Most Stupendous Show on Earth. Below, they went on to describe the exhibits in term that bore little relation of reality.

However, to the youth of Hertbury and the surrounding villages the fair was an event of importance. The boys at Malton Hall School regarded it in the same light, and money was saved in order to be squandered recklessly in one magnificent orgy.

Biggles knew all about the fair coming, of course, but he was not particularly impressed.

For one thing the posters strained his credulity to beyond reasonable limits. Again, he disliked crowds at any time. When accompanied by the blare of machine-made music he disliked them even more ; for which reason, when the fair arrived, he announced to Smith his intention of keeping as far away from it as possible. This not only surprised Smith, but grieved him very much, because he was one of the most ardent supporters of the festival.

True to his word, Biggles remained at school for the first two days, but on the third he succumbed to Smith's pleading and allowed himself to be persuaded. He didn't really want to go, and put forward every excuse he could think of, the chief of which was finance. "I've only got three and six to last me till the end of the term," he expostulated.

"You needn't spend any money," argued Smith. "Not a penny. There are all sorts of things besides the swings and roundabouts."

"What sort of things ? " inquired Biggles. "There's a sword swallower. He's jolly good.

He eats fire, too. You don't have to pay."

Biggles was frankly sceptical. " You don't mean to tell me he eats swords because he likes them ? "

"Well, not exactly," admitted Smith. "At the end a chap comes round with a cap, but there's no need for you to stay. When the collection starts I move on."

"Isn't that a bit shabby ? " queried Biggles dubiously.

"Not at all. After all, I don't ask him to perform," countered Smith. "He has to have an audience, so it might be said that I actually help him. But I really prefer the stalls where it's possible to make money."

Biggles looked interested. " How ? "

"There's a boxer. He stands on a platform and invites anyone to knock him down. If you can he gives you ten shillings."

"And what if you can't ? "

"You lose your shilling."

"What shilling ? "

"The shilling you pay to have a try, of course. You didn't think he did it for fun, did you ? "

"No," answered Biggles. "Have you seen anyone knock this chap down ? "

"Not yet," admitted Smith. "But it's fun watching people try."

"Have you tried ? "

" Me ? No jolly fear ! "

"You're not suggesting that I try, I hope ? " Smith changed the subject. "There are places where you can make money without getting hurt." "That sounds better," answered Biggles. "Have

you made any money ? "

" Well—er—no. That is, not yet. I probably shall to-night, though."

" How ? "

" How ? They offer prizes for almost everything."

"But you haven't won anything ? "

"I did. I won a goldfish in a bowl."

" Where is it ? "

"A chap knocked it out of my hand and broke it. When I was looking for the fish somebody trod on it."

"I don't want any goldfish," stated Biggles. "There's a jolly good game if you can throw."

"Throw what ? "

" Balls."

" What at ? "

"Well, for instance, there's a row of faces cut out of iron or something. Their mouths are wide open showing their teeth. They have five teeth. You pay a penny for three balls. If you can knock down four teeth in the same face you get a prize, usually an ornament.

You can choose what you like from the stall. If you can knock down five teeth you get half a crown, it's a fact. The half-crown is there for you to see, on a piece of velvet. A good shot might easily make a lot of money."

"Have you seen anybody win the half-crown ? "

"Not quite," Smith was forced to admit. "But that's only because people are such rotten shots. I've seen plenty of people knock down four teeth and get a vase."

" All right," decided Biggles. " I'll come."

It was Smith's last temptation that had won him over, for while he did not say so he knew he was a good thrower. Even when he was quite small he seemed to have a natural aptitude for throwing straight, and constant practice with stones at the scavenging crows near his home, chiefly to amuse the native boys, had made him exceptionally proficient.

The fair, when they reached it that evening, was in full swing, and while it was even more crowded and noisier than Biggles expected, he

entered into the spirit of the thing.

Naphtha flares hissed and spluttered everywhere, casting a lurid light on a throng of people who, with boisterous shouts, struck at each other with paper whips, pelted each other with confetti, or squirted water from lead tubes. Above the human din rose the blare of mechanical music, the clanging of bells and the crack of shots at the rifle ranges, where coloured celluloid balls dancing on jets of water formed the target. Here, Biggles was sorry to find, there were no prizes, so he did not waste his pence.

For a time they watched the fire-eater eating fire, and the boxer trying to persuade people in the crowd

to knock him down. After that they moved along the line of stalls, from one of which a very fat woman in a star-spangled shawl invited Biggles to have his fortune told. He declined, with thanks. The noise, the crowd, and the smells were now such that he would have gone home ; and presently he was to wish that he had followed that inclination ; but Smith would not hear of it. Holding Biggles by the arm he dragged him to the stand of the grinning faces, where for simply knocking down five teeth one could pick up half a crown. It seemed that Smith had spoken the truth, for there, surrounded by cheap glasses and crockery, on a piece of dirty velvet, lay the shining silver coin. There were a fair number of spectators watching a fair number of triers ; but the half-crown remained on its throne.

On Biggles pushing his way to the front, the owner of the stand, a swarthy, coarse-looking fellow with black curly hair and gold earrings, invited him to have a go, holding out three balls encouragingly. "All the fun of the fair ! " he bawled. "Four teeth and you pick where you like ! Five teeth gets the silver half-dollar ! "

Biggles handed over his penny, and in exchange received three wooden balls.

"Stand back and give the kid a chance ! " shouted the proprietor.

Biggles put two balls through a leering mouth and knocked down four teeth, which the showman was able to pull up again by a cord, ready for the next man.

"Hard luck, sonny ! " cried the showman. "Pick a vase, any one you like."

Biggles selected a crude ornament of silvered glass on which had been

daubed some flowers of a species unknown to horticulture. He gave it to Smith to hold and proffered another penny for three more balls.

"Knock 'em down, kid, knock 'em down—you're a sport ! " sang the showman.

Again Biggles got four teeth, but there was something queer about the effort that brought a slight frown to his forehead. Once more two of the balls had gone into the gaping mouth. The first shot was a miss, and the ball bounced back with a clang from the iron face. The second ball knocked down three teeth. The third struck fair and square between the two remaining teeth, knocking them back ; but while one fell, the other in some strange way seemed to recover. Anyhow, it was still there.

"Tough luck again, kid ! " shouted the showman, with rather less enthusiasm than before.

Through half-closed eyes he had another look at Biggles as he shouted, " Pick where you like ! "

Biggles selected another ornament and added it to Smith's collection. The showman was no longer looking at him, and he had to touch him on the arm to get three more balls, which the man seemed to hand over with some reluctance.

There was now a fairly big crowd, a number of new spectators having been attracted apparently by Biggles' markmanship.

Smash went Biggles' first ball into the white teeth, and down went two of them.

Smash went the second, and down went two more. Smack went the third against the remaining tooth, and over it went.

Biggles turned to Smith with a yell of triumph. " Got it ! " he cried, and reached for the half crown.

"Just a minute, sonny ! " shouted the showman, pulling his cord sharply. "Only four.

Take a vase. Pick where you like ! "

Slightly bewildered Biggles looked up and stared at the mouth in which five teeth were again showing ready for the next customer. A wave of indignation surged through him, for now he saw through the

trick.

" I got five ! "he cried shrilly.

"No you didn't, you got four," said the man harshly, and looked away.
"Roll up ! Roll up

! Three balls a penny ! Four teeth and you pick where you like ! "

Biggles nearly choked. "I tell you I got five ! " he cried, and turned to the spectators for support. " I got five, didn't I? "

"Yes, he got five," answered someone. "Give the kid his money !
"shouted a voice at the back.

The showman ignored the request. "Roll up ! Roll up ! Who's next ? " he bellowed.

But Biggles was not to be denied. His blood was boiling, as the saying is. "I got five and you know it ! " he yelled, pushing away two or three rough looking louts who had begun to jostle him.

A voice in the crowd cried" Shame ! "

The showman took no notice.

Tears of exasperation came to Biggles' eyes when he saw how he had been beaten by the trickster.

A man now pushed his way to the front. It was, Biggles saw with dismay, none other than Colour Sergeant Buckle of the convoy, who certainly had no reason to take up his cause. His rosette still fluttered in his cap and tucked under his arm was a little swagger cane. The points of his moustache stuck out like bodkins, giving him such a fierce appearance that Biggles was glad the soldier was looking at the showman, not at him.

The sergeant's first words left no doubt as to where his sympathies lay. Pointing an accusing finger at the showman, he said tersely : "Give him the dough ! He won it. I was watching."

The showman had to answer. "I tell you he only got four," he blustered.

The sergeant's moustache seemed to quiver. "And I tell you you're a liar ! " he rapped out, with cold steel in his voice. " Don't argue the toss with me, you dirty skimshanker !

Give the kid his dough ! "

If looks could slay the sergeant's career would have ended on the spot. But the showman, after a quick glance at the crowd, which was beginning to show signs of hostility, changed his tune. " All right, if you say so," he muttered, and picking up the half-crown, fairly threw it at Biggles, who caught it, put it in his pocket, and would have retired had not the press of spectators prevented it.

There the matter should have ended. But at this juncture a voice said loudly : " Make way for the Lancers ! " And there appeared in front of the stand, with a jangle of spurs, two tall figures in blue tunics and striped trousers. On their heads, pillbox hats were held at a seemingly impossible angle by shiny black chinstraps. Under his arm each carried a walking-out riding switch. Their chins were held high, and their chests, showing several medal ribbons, stuck out in a manner that did not seem quite natural.

Looking at them, Biggles formed the opinion that they were slightly inebriated, a view to which their subsequent behaviour lent support. Which is not to say they were drunk, or anything like it. They were, let us say, in that carefree mood when they could be swayed easily to either mirth or anger.

Said one of them, casually : "What's the trouble, Colour Sergeant ? Want any help ? "

The sergeant explained. With a contemptuous toss of his head towards the showman he remarked : "That cheap chiseller tried to do this kid out of his dough. He won the half-dollar fair enough. I saw him with my own eyes."

The Lancer looked surprised. "You don't say ? " "Didn't want to give him the dough,"

repeated the sergeant, in a voice heavy with disgust.

" He didn't ? "

"No, he didn't. Wouldn't give it to him." "He wouldn't ? "

"No, he wouldn't."

The Lancer looked at his companion. "Did you hear that, Bill ? Wouldn't give the kid his dough ? "

"He wouldn't ? "

"No, he wouldn't."

The second Lancer drew deeply at his cigarette. "Well, fancy that now," he murmured.

"Tried to make out the kid had only knocked down four teeth."

"You don't say ? "

"That's what the Colour Sergeant says. He says the show's crooked—crooked as a dog's hind leg. That's what he says."

"Must be right then, Joe," rejoined the second soldier thoughtfully.

"Tried to cheat the kid out of half a dollar." "He did ? "

" Yes, he did."

" Well, I never ! "

The showman now made a foolish mistake. No doubt he was angry, but anger is no excuse for folly—at least, not where the army is concerned. Glaring at the Lancers he snarled : "You mind your own business ! "

The two soldiers looked steadfastly into each other's eyes. "Did you hear that, Bill ? "

said Joe in a curious voice.

"Was he talking to us ? "queried the other.

"Must have been. He was looking at us." The speaker turned slowly to the showman. "

Was you talking to us, may I ask ? " he inquired in a voice so polite that the showman should have been warned.

"Yes, I was talking to you," snapped the showman venomously.

"And may I ask what you think you're a'talking to ? " inquired the soldier smoothly.

"I ain't no good at natural history," sneered the showman.

It took a moment for this jibe to sink in. When it did, and the soldier spoke again, his voice had taken on an almost dulcet tone. " Oh ! So you ain't, ain't you ? "

" No, I ain't."

"And p'raps you wouldn't know what uniform this is you're insulting ? "

"I don't and I don't want," rasped the showman.

The soldier fingered one of the buttons of his tunic —a silver button embossed with the grim emblem of a Skull and Crossbones. "Never heard of the Death or Glory Boys, maybe ? " he inquired, almost dreamily.

"No, but I've heard of red herrings," scoffed the showman.

The soldier turned to his companion. "Did you hear that, Bill ? "he asked in a shocked voice. " Never heard of the Death or Glory Boys."

Bill dropped his cigarette and put his foot on it. "Time he did," he suggested.

" That's just what I was thinking."

The showman now chose to ignore the soldiers. Facing the crowd he shouted : " Roll up !

Roll up ! All the fun of the fair!

" Oh well," said Joe, "if it's only fun you want, that's easy." Very carefully he selected a large vase. He tossed it into the air as if to test it for balance, caught it deftly, and then sent it smashing into the middle of the display. "How about that for a bit of fun ? " he inquired blandly.

A shout went up from the crowd. "That's the way to learn 'em, Tommy ! " yelled a voice.

Now the showman, seeing the temper of the crowd, should have kept himself under control. Had he treated the thing as a joke all might still have been well. Instead of which he lost his head, and tried to strike the soldier, Bill.

Bill, with an ease that thrilled Biggles with admiration, side-stepped, and with a terrific right hook knocked the showman backwards into

the middle of his china shop.

The crowd roared its delight at this unexpected entertainment.

There seems to be something in the sound of breaking glass and china that makes people temporarily insane. Thus was it now. A coconut came sailing over the heads of the crowd to land with another crash in the display. That seemed to be all the crowd was waiting for, and missiles began to fly. The showman, trying to get up, stumbled and fell again in the middle of his wares. Pandemonium broke loose.

By this time, it need hardly be said, Biggles' one idea was to get clear. This appeared to be impossible. He and Smith, and others in the front rank, were pushed forward into the stand, and were, in fact, in some danger of being trampled to death. Keeping his feet with difficulty, Biggles scrambled across the stand, pulling Smith with him, to the open space behind it. Glancing round, he saw P.C. Grumble waving his arms and shouting in a futile attempt to restore order. He might as well have tried to stem a stampeding herd of buffaloes. He, too, was knocked down, for by this time it looked as if everyone at the fair had converged on the spot to see what all the noise was about. The posts that held up the awning over the show gave way before the pressure, and the canvas came down, burying the boys under it. Biggles cut a hole through it with his penknife, crawled through, and helped Smith. No word was spoken. None was necessary, for both minds were now actuated by a single thought, which was to get back to school and safety. They started to run, but Biggles caught his foot in a guy rope and took a header into the stomach of a man who was coming the other way. "Sorry," he gasped, scrambling to his feet, and would have gone on ; but a hand grabbed his arm and held him. Looking up he saw that it was Mr. Bruce.

"What are you doing ? " asked Mr. Bruce curtly, looking at the vases Smith still clutched.

" Nothing, sir," answered Biggles. "We were on our way back to school."

Mr. Bruce pointed at the vases. "Have you been looting ? "

" No, sir," replied Biggles. "We won them—didn't we, Smith ? "

"Yes, we won them," murmured Smith weakly. "Had you anything to do with starting this riot ? " " We were there, sir, but that's all," asserted Biggles. "Very well. Go back to school at once."

The boys obeyed the order willingly. "Have you still got the half-crown ? " asked Smith anxiously as they ran.

"You bet I have," answered Biggles.

"I told you it was easy to make money."

" I wouldn't call it easy," panted Biggles.

P.C. Grimble came to the school the following day to make some inquiries, as he said.

He had learned, apparently, that some boys from the school were involved in the riot.

After he had gone Biggles, was called to the Head's study. He encountered Mr. Bruce just leaving, so when he went in he was prepared for the worst.

"What is all this I hear about you starting a fight at the fair last night, Bigglesworth ? "

inquired the Head.

" I didn't start it, sir," protested Biggles.

"Who did ? "

Biggles told the Head exactly what had happened, and the Head, with twinkling eyes, accepted his version of the affair. Biggles suspected that it was the part the soldiers had played, rather than anything he had done, that was chiefly responsible for this benevolent attitude.

" I think it's best to keep away from these affairs, don't you ? "inquired the Head at the finish.

Biggles agreed.

"The moral is," concluded the Head, "you can always rely on the army to do the right thing."

"Absolutely, sir," declared Biggles. And he meant it. At that moment he was in complete accord with that particular sentiment.

"ONE GOOD TURN..."

To Biggles, one of the most pleasant occurrences of this period of his career was the strange adventure that began in the garden of a house named "The Garth." It did not begin at all well, but at the finish it enabled him to pay a debt of gratitude. And there is, he found, no occasion more satisfying than that in which kindness can be repaid in actions rather than words.

Nothing could have been more simple, or innocent, than the way it started. He was out for a stroll with Smith, with no particular object in view, when they saw Hervey and Brickwell in the distance, coming

towards them. As they themselves had not yet been seen, they decided, on the principle of discretion being the better part of valour, to avoid a clash by keeping out of sight until the boys had gone past.

They were at this time walking along the boundary hedge of a big, red brick house, built in Victorian style, that stood in its own grounds some distance back from the road. This hedge was not the front hedge of the property. On the main road, the house and gardens were protected by a high brick wall behind which Biggles had never seen. But up one side of the estate there was a lane, bounded on the house side by a thick laurel hedge, and on the other by a thorn hedge beyond which there was an open field.

The thorn hedge was obviously an obstacle not to be tackled without discomfort and the risk of torn clothes. In any case, the field beyond offered no cover of any sort. Wherefore Biggles and Smith, without even discussing the matter, chose the laurel hedge as a haven of refuge.

It turned out that this hedge was not such a formidable barrier as might have been supposed by looking at it from the outside. The absence of thorns made it an easy matter to push a way well into it ; and Biggles, prompted perhaps by curiosity, did in fact force a way to the far side of it. Smith, accepting his leadership as usual, remained with him.

Biggles now found himself gazing with some trepidation into what had at one time been part of the gardens of the house, but might now be best described as a jungle. There were some fairly large trees, natural rather than ornamental, under which flourished a riot of weeds and overgrown gooseberry bushes.

Biggles was not particularly interested in this beyond the fact that he

was looking at something that he had never seen before. His sensations were chiefly apprehensive, because he knew that they were trespassing, and he merely hoped that no one would come out of the house, which he could see about fifty yards away. There was no need for him to warn Smith to sit still. because, if for no other reason, Hervey and Brickwell could now be heard on the far side of the hedge.

Sitting quietly gazing at the scene Biggles saw a jackdaw pitch on the dead limb of a tree about twenty feet or so above his head. The branch looked fairly strong, about six inches in diameter, and was broken off short. The bird walked along the branch and disappeared in the end, making it apparent that the limb was hollow. It was soon out again, and with its usual call of jock-jock flew away and disappeared.

A minute passed. Smith rose slowly to his feet and stood listening. "It's all right, they've gone," he said, referring of course to Hervey and Brickwell.

Biggles was still gazing at the hollow branch. "Did you see that jackdaw go in there ? "

he asked.

"You bet I did," answered Smith. "I'd say it's had a nest there. We'll remember it next bird's-nesting season. It looks easy to get to."

"Did you notice something in its beak ? " inquired Biggles.

" Yes. I thought it was a bit of silver paper," opined Smith. "Jackdaws are always picking up things, particularly shiny things, so I've heard."

"Well, whatever it was, it wasn't silver paper," averred Biggles, getting up. "Silver paper shines, but this thing seemed to sparkle."

"Bit of glass perhaps'," suggested Smith, disinterestedly.

"Could have been," replied Biggles.

With that the subject was dismissed. Nor was it referred to again. The boys got back through the hedge, ascertained that the coast was clear, and continued their walk.

Some days later—it was Sunday afternoon—Biggles suggested that they should for their afternoon stroll go as far as the cave. There might still be some apples lying about, and if they were lucky they

might get a cup of tea and a slice of cake from Mrs. Grant. They went, and had the good fortune to see Mrs. Grant at her back door shaking out the dinner cloth. She gave them what Biggles thought was a rather sickly smile, quite different from her usual cheerful greeting. Moreover, her eyes were red, as if she had been crying.

Biggles raised his cap, and feeling somewhat embarrassed, nearly passed on without speaking. Then curiosity got the better of him and he half turned. "You don't look very well to-day, Mrs. Grant," he remarked, with the candour of youth. "Is anything the matter

? "

Mrs. Grant nodded, trying to smile through tears. "I'm in great trouble," she said.

"I'm very sorry to hear that," answered Biggles, with genuine concern. "Is there anything I can do ? "

"No, I'm afraid not," replied Mrs. Grant. "Of course, you know what's happened, don't you ? "

Biggles didn't know, and he said so. He spoke the literal truth when he said he hadn't the remotest idea.

"But surely you've heard about my young sister ? " said Mrs. Grant.

"No. I didn't even know you had a sister," returned Biggles.

"She's been locked up."

"Locked up ! Do you mean by the police ? " Mrs. Grant nodded.

" What for ? "

" Stealing."

"What did she steal ? "

Mrs. Grant drew herself up. "She didn't steal anything. We're not that sort of family."

"Well, what do they say she's stolen ? "

"A diamond ring. I don't believe a word of it." "Where was the ring ? "

"At the house where she worked as a parlourmaid."

"That's pretty awful, particularly if she didn't do it," observed Biggles, not knowing what else to say. It was really because Mrs. Grant did not speak again that he went on, trying to be sympathetic. "Where did your sister work, Mrs. Grant ? "

"At 'The Garth.' Major Travers' house."

"Oh," said Biggles, and turned away. Then he stopped dead. "Did you say The Garth ? "

" Yes, you know, the big house at the corner of Clifton's Lane."

Biggles stared at the woman in front of him. But he did not see her. He was looking at a picture that had flashed into his mind's eye—the picture of a black bird hopping along a branch. For a moment or two he hesitated, wondering if he should tell Mrs. Grant what he was thinking. He decided not to, because he thought it would be cruel to raise a hope that might come to nothing. "Tell me about the robbery," he requested in a curious voice.

"How did it happen ? "

" It was just bad luck that Vera—that's my sister —was alone in the house," asserted Mrs. Grant. "Major and Mrs. Travers had gone out. The other girls were out, too. In the evening, when Mrs. Travers went upstairs to her bedroom to get ready for dinner, she missed her diamond ring. She says she left it on the dressing-table. The Major fetched the police. They asked Vera where the ring was. Vera said she didn't know anything about it. But because no one else had been in the house the police said Vera must have taken it."

"But a burglar could have taken it ! " declared Biggles.

"The police say no, because a burglar would have taken everything in the jewel case as well. You see, there were other jewels besides the ring. Now they've taken Vera into custody and are trying to make her confess." Mrs. Grant's voice broke off into renewed sobs.

Biggles was really upset. " Please don't cry, Mrs. Grant," he pleaded. "They'll have to prove your sister took the ring before they can send her to prison. The ring may turn up yet."

Mrs. Grant shook her head, apparently unable to speak.

" I'll go and see if I can find the ring," promised Biggles.

Mrs. Grant smiled wanly. "I'm afraid there's nothing you can do about it," she said sadly.

"You never know," said Biggles mysteriously. "We won't worry you any more now.

Come on, Smith. Good afternoon, Mrs. Grant."

Biggles could hardly get through the gate quickly

enough. Outside he grabbed Smith by the arm. "You remember that jackdaw we saw in the tree when we were hiding from Hervey ? "

" Yes."

That was The Garth."

" I know it was."

"The jackdaw might have had the ring."

" It looked like a bit of silver paper to me."

"I'm sure it sparkled. There was a kind of flash. Silver paper doesn't sparkle. You said you'd heard about jackdaws taking things. In India the kites take eggs and things. Come on, I'm going to have a look in that hole ! "

"In your best clothes ? " queried Smith, looking concerned. "You'll get in an awful mess."

"We can't be bothered with clothes when a friend is in trouble," asserted Biggles. "The tree should be easy enough to climb."

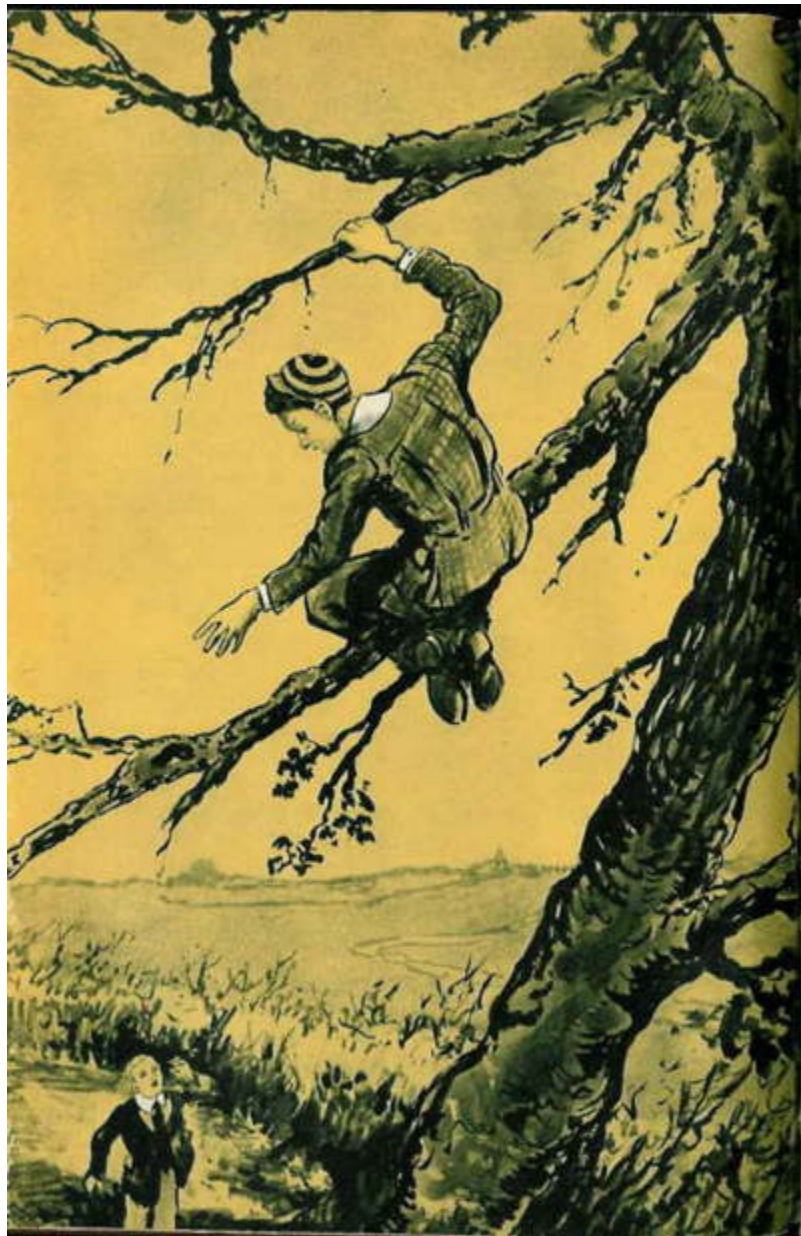
It may be easy, but that branch looked pretty rotten to me," said Smith dubiously.

"Then we'll break it off," declared Biggles. "Let's hurry."

Walking briskly to the lane they crawled through the laurel hedge, using the same place as before. Nothing had changed. "I'll go up the tree. You keep cave," ordered Biggles, regarding the tree critically, for now that he was confronted by cold fact certain difficulties became more apparent, as they so often do. To reach the hollow branch would be easy enough, he saw, for there were other branches that came nearly to the ground. But the limb—or rather, stump—with which he was concerned, stretched out from the trunk for a matter of five or six

feet ; and the hole was in the end. The branch, being hollow, was dead, and probably would not support his weight. The difficulty, therefore, was how to get far enough along the branch in order that a hand could be inserted into the hollow end. Indeed, had it not been for another branch, this difficulty would have been insuperable ; but it so happened that a second branch, a thinner one, projected at the same angle from the trunk about three feet above it. It would, thought Biggles, be possible to make this branch support his weight while he investigated the lower one. Up the tree he went to put the matter to test.

In a minute or two he was sitting astride the hollow branch, holding on to the live branch just over his head ; and in this position he began to move forward a few inches at a time, taking his weight on his arms and then lowering himself gently. As nothing happened he gained confidence, and was about two feet from his objective when there came a warning



hiss of " Cave ! " from Smith. It was followed instantly by a shout.

Biggles sat still. Looking down he saw Smith in a sheepish attitude that told him the worst. This made Biggles angry, for he felt that Smith should have kept a sharper look-out ; and he was about to tell him so when a well-dressed, military-looking man, accompanied by two terriers, appeared below.

The man looked at Smith, then at Biggles on his perch. "What are you boys doing ? " he asked in a not unfriendly voice.

"I'm trying to get to a jackdaw's nest, sir," answered Biggles.

"You mind you don't fall," said the gentleman.

The warning came too late. There was a crack like a pistol shot as the branch on which Biggles sat snapped off short, leaving him hanging by his hands from the branch above him.

The gentleman perceived his danger. "Hang on ! " he shouted, and then rushed back towards the house crying : " Blake ! Blake ! Bring the thatching ladder ! "

Biggles needed no advice about hanging on. He had every intention of doing so. The question was, how long could he hang on ? Already his arms, supporting the full weight of his body, felt as if they might leave their sockets at any moment. The ground looked a ghastly distance away. Smith, looking like a dwarf, his face as white as paper, stared up goggle-eyed.

Smith did all he could. "Hang on, Bigglesworth, hang on ! " he croaked. "Remember the School ! "

What the School had to do with the situation Biggles could not see. He hung on, but he knew it was only now a matter of seconds before he fell, for his strength was failing fast.

Even though he could see two men running with a long ladder he thought they would be too late to save him. Clenching his teeth he hung on with the frenzy of despair. The men seemed a long time getting the ladder up.

It was touch and go. The ladder was only just long enough to reach the branch, and for that reason it was far from steady. Biggles put out a hand and seized a rung. With a supreme effort he twisted his body over to get a foothold. In this he failed, so knowing he was going anyway he made a despairing clutch at the ladder. He got his arms and legs round

it, and that was as much as he could do. His ebbing strength then failed entirely and he slid down the ladder like a plummet. The gentleman leapt forward to catch him, and did in fact break his fall.

"Oh, well caught, sir ! " cried Smith shrilly.

Biggles sat still where he had landed, his face in his hands, trembling from shock, or relief, or both.

"Have you hurt yourself ? "asked the gentleman.

Very slowly Biggles picked himself up, testing each limb in turn. "I don't think so, sir,"

he managed to get out.

"You might have broken your neck," said the man. Biggles was well aware of it.

Blake, apparently a gardener, spoke. " Wot was you up to, anyway ? he growled. "Ought ter know better, climbin' trees on a Sunday afternoon. Wot won't you young demons get up to next, I'd like ter know."

"I was looking for a diamond ring," explained Biggles lamely. He turned to the gentleman. "Are you Major Travers, sir ? "

"I am."

"Well, I was looking for the ring your wife lost."

"Up a tree ? " Major Travers seemed amused.

Yes," stated Biggles. "You see, one day I saw a jackdaw fly into this tree and it seemed to have something in its beak." Biggles picked up the fallen branch, stood it on end, and banged it on the ground.

A lot of things fell out, mostly twigs and crumbs of rotten wood. But there were other things as well—a piece of wire, some silver paper, string, and a safety pin. Biggles picked up the stuff and let it trickle through his fingers. There was a sudden flash.

Biggles grabbed at it, opened his hand, and let out a cry of triumph as he held out the object for Major Travers to see. "Is that the ring your wife lost, sir ? " he inquired.

For a moment or two Major Travers seemed unable to speak. He could only stare. At last he said, very quietly : "Yes, that's it." He reached out and took it.

"They'll let Vera go, now, I hope ? "said Biggles.

Major Travers was still looking slightly stunned. "Why yes—yes---of course," he stammered. "Poor girl. How awful. She was telling the truth after all. Dear—dear.

Whatever can I say to her ? I must get in touch with the police at once. I must tell my wife about this. How would you boys like to come to the house and have some tea ? "

"We should like to very much, sir," answered Biggles. "But if you don't mind I think we ought to go straight away to Mrs. Grant and tell her that Vera will be all right."

" Who's Mrs. Grant ? "

" Vera's married sister. She's a friend of ours and she's worried nearly to death."

"Very well. You can go and tell her that I shall do all in my power to make amends for this unfortunate mistake. But a minute is neither here nor there. Wait, I'll be back in a moment."

Major Travers hurried off. Blake, shaking his head, shouldered the ladder and followed him.

Biggles and Smith sifted the nest thoroughly while they were waiting, but to their disappointment they found no more jewellery.

Major Travers returned, carrying a large box with

a floral decoration. "There you are," he said. "There's a box of chocolates for you from my wife, and there's a couple of shillings apiece from me."

"Oh thank you, sir," said the boys in unison.

"You must come and have tea with us another day."

"We'd love to, sir."

"Good-bye, then. I must let the police know about this at once."

"Good-bye, sir."

The boys went out into the lane and lost no time in opening the box. Smith whistled when he saw the contents. "Fair do's. Half each." he demanded.

"All right," agreed Biggles. "Really, I ought to have more than you. After all, I went up the tree."

"I kept cave," claimed Smith.

"Jolly badly, too," asserted Biggles. "But we won't argue about it."

They hurried towards the cottage, eating chocolates. Indeed, Smith ate so many that at last Biggles was forced to protest. "You've had your half already," he said.

"If we run into Hervey, and he sees that box, he'll scoff the lot," observed Smith.

They reached the cottage to find the door closed, but a knock brought out Mrs. Grant, who still looked as if she had been crying.

"Dry up, Mrs. Grant," said Biggles cheerfully.

"Everything's all right. We found the ring. Major Travers is in touch with the police and he says he'll do everything he can for Vera. Here, have a chocolate."

Mrs. Grant looked astonished, as well she might.

"Oh, isn't that wonderful ! " she cried. "Come in and tell me about it."

Biggles obliged.

"And now," said Mr. Grant, laughing through her tears when he had finished, "what do you say to some tea ? I baked a cake yesterday."

Jolly good idea," agreed Biggles.

VIII

THE TREASURE TRAIL

A LUDICROUS interlude, for which Biggles and Smith were held by certain disgruntled persons to be responsible, was one that became known—and remains known to this day—as the Hertbury Treasure Hunt. Whoever may have been to blame it caused Biggles a good deal of worry, although there were those with a sense of humour who got a good laugh out of it.

It all began with a shower of rain. Biggles and Smith, out for a run, were caught without coats, so they took cover under a tarpaulin-

rigged shelter at the invitation of its sole occupant, an old roadman named Farrow. The refuge was a rough affair, but as the old man said, it was good enough to brew a dish of tea in, and keep his tools.

For some time, while the rain pelted down, the conversation covered a wide range of subjects, from the weather to the art of cracking flint stones for road mending. Then Smith happened to remark : "I

suppose you sometimes find things when you are digging out the gutters beside the road

? "

The old man said he had found a great many things in his time, from old keys to gig-lamps, and from dead cats to old coins. Indeed, that very morning he had unearthed a coin not yet identified. It was an old one, and that was all he knew about it. He showed it to them.

"It's silver, anyway," declared Smith, removing the dirt that still adhered to the coin by the simple process of spitting on it and rubbing it on his sleeve.

" Oh aye, it's silver," agreed the old man. "A florin o' some sort I reckon."

"Who's head is that on it ? "asked Smith. "Couldn't say."

"Where exactly did you find this ? " asked Smith carelessly, although Biggles could see he was really trying to suppress excitement.

"Way back up the road beside the old abbey." "You mean those ruins in the field, near the road, close by Grummit's farm ? "

"That's right."

"I see," said Smith thoughtfully.

The rain had now stopped, so Biggles suggested they might be getting back to school.

This was agreed, so thanking the old man for the use of his shelter they went on their way.

For a time Smith was strangely silent, but he then divulged the fascinating thoughts that were exercising his mind. "You know," he said, " it wouldn't surprise me if there was a treasure buried in those

old ruins."

Biggles said it wouldn't surprise him, either.

It's just the sort of place," averred Smith. Biggles agreed that it was.

"It would be just the sort of place I should choose myself to hide a treasure—if I had one,

" continued Smith.

"You haven't one," Biggles pointed out.

"I said if I had," retorted Smith irritably. "People are always finding treasures," he added. "Are they ? "

"Of course they are. You can read about it in the papers almost every day. They say there are buried treasures everywhere if only they could be found."

"Who says ? "

"How should I know ? "

"I wish we could find one," remarked Biggles. "That's what I mean," asserted Smith. "

Why shouldn't we ? "

"Where are you going to start looking ? "

"The ruins of the old abbey, of course. It's an ideal place. There's bound to be at least one treasure there if we could strike the right spot. You saw that florin, or whatever it was.

Why should there be only one ? I'll bet there's a box full—possibly several boxes."

Biggles seemed doubtful. "Even if there were, how should we know where to start looking ? " he questioned. "We've nothing to go on."

"We could soon work out where a man going to bury a treasure would be most likely to put it," argued Smith.

Biggles expressed his doubts about this somewhat casual method. "We haven't a chart,"

he pointed out. "If there's a treasure there's usually a chart."

"We could jolly soon make one," declared Smith, not to be put off.

"How ? "

"In one of the old books in the library there's a loose page at the beginning. It's vellum or something. We could draw one on that, marking the position of the treasure with a red cross. That's how it's usually done."

"But we don't know where the treasure is buried," Biggles pointed out.

"What does it matter ? " cried Smith. "If we don't find it in one place we should have to start digging somewhere else."

"We might have to do an awful lot of digging," returned Biggles.

"If we didn't find it we should be no worse off than we are now," stated Smith.

Biggles admitted the force of this argument. "You never know," said Smith vaguely.

"No, you never know," agreed Biggles.

"Just imagine it," went on Smith, as his imagination got into its stride. "Think of how the chaps at school would feel if we walked in with a chest of gold."

"The coin was silver," reminded Biggles.

"Where there's silver there's gold," persisted Smith. "The two things go together. That's why people always talk about gold and silver."

Smith's enthusiasm was infectious, and Biggles weakened. "What about tools ? " was his final difficulty. "We can't dig with our hands."

"What are the roadman's tools for ? " inquired Smith sarcastically. "They're practically on the spot. We could borrow them when he's finished work and put them back afterwards. He's a decent sort —not the sort to make a fuss about it."

"All right," assented Biggles. "When do we start ? "

"As soon as possible, before news of the treasure leaks out," answered

Smith. " And remember, we're not letting anyone into the secret."

" What secret ? "

"The treasure, you poor chump ! " cried Smith. He shrugged. "Of course, if you're going to do nothing but raise objections I'll find it myself—then you'll look silly."

"Who's going to make the chart ? "

"We'll make it together. We'll put water in the ink to make it look old. We'll put the red cross fifteen feet east of that old tree that stands in the ruins."

"Why fifteen feet ? "

"Because that's a distance a man would naturally choose to bury a treasure 1 "

" Why east ? "

"That direction is as good as any other, isn't it ? After all, it's bound to be one or the other. If east turns out to be wrong we can always try west, can't we ? "

"I suppose so," Biggles was forced to admit.

And so it came about that after school the following day, the treasure seekers, complete with chart, and the borrowed tools over their shoulders, arrived at the objective. There was some argument as to which direction was east, but eventually the matter was agreed.

With great care Smith measured fifteen feet and drove in the point of his pick. "This is it,

" he said, confidently. "Now for the pieces of eight ! "

"I thought it was a florin," observed Biggles.

"Pieces of eight sounds better," averred Smith as he went to work. "You shovel the dirt away while I loosen it with the pick," he requested. " Of course, we'll go halves, but really I ought to have the biggest share because I thought of the idea."

"Let's find the treasure first," suggested Biggles practically.

The work had not gone on for very long when Mr. Grummit, the

farmer, arrived on the scene. In his breeches and leggings he might have been John Bull himself. "What do you boys think you're doing ? " he inquired curtly.

Biggles looked at Smith. Smith looked at Biggles. "Shall we tell him ? " he whispered.

"We'd better," answered Biggles.

Smith turned to the farmer. "We're looking for the treasure," he stated.

Mr. Grummit frowned. "What treasure ? "

"The treasure that's buried here. Didn't you know about it ? "

"I certainly did not. First I've heard about it." "We haven't told anyone else," explained Smith. The fanner advanced. He pointed to the hole.

"What makes you think the treasure's there ? "

" It says so on the chart," answered Smith.

The farmer looked interested. " D'you mean you've got a chart ? "

"Of course we've got a chart," replied Smith, allowing the fanner to have a quick look at it from a distance. "The red cross is marked fifteen feet east of the tree."

"You're digging north of it."

"Are we ? " For a moment Smith looked crestfallen. "Well, that's our mistake," he admitted. "Not that it really matters. The treasure is here, and if we go on digging we're bound to come to it."

The farmer changed his tone. "Oh you are, are you ? Well, you stop making a mess of my field and clear off," said he, harshly.

"Do you mean you won't let us go on ? " cried Smith in dismay.

"That's just what I do mean," answered the fanner tartly. "Off you go, the pair of you, or I'll put my stick about you. And take those tools where they belong."

Looking disconsolate the boys started to walk away, but before they had gone far the fanner remembered something. "You can leave that chart with me ! " he shouted.

But this was going too far. "Not likely ! " yelled Smith, and fled across the field at his best speed.

As the farmer did not follow they soon steadied their pace. "That just shows what people are like," announced Smith. " Grummit is a cad."

Biggles agreed. "It wouldn't surprise me if he tries to find the treasure himself."

This was a possibility that had not occurred to Smith. "Well, I call that a bit thick ! " he exclaimed bitterly. "We'll come back to-morrow to see. If he finds the treasure I shall claim it. After all, we've got the chart to prove that we started looking for it."

They returned the tools to the roadside shelter and, dejected by the sudden death of their scheme, returned to school.

The following day they returned to the ruins to find such a scene of activity that they could only stare in astonishment. Not only was Grummit there, but at least a score of other men as well. The ground for at least an acre had been denuded of turf. There were heaps of earth everywhere, between numerous holes and trenches that were still being deepened. Soil was being flung into the air by persons who had dug themselves out of sight.

" Well," burst out Smith at last. "Of all the cheek ! That's what comes of letting people into a secret. Here are more men coming with picks and shovels. The whole town will soon be here at this rate ! "

This, in the event, turned out to be understatement.

"What beats me," said Biggles wonderingly, as they stood and regarded the excavations,

"is how all these people got to know about it so quickly."

The answer was not forthcoming at that moment ; but later it turned out that the farmer had told his wife in confidence. She had told the housemaid, also in confidence, and the housemaid had told the postman. The postman had told everyone on his round—in confidence, of course. For the first time Biggles was able to observe the speed at which rumour can travel when the operative word is "Gold."

The boys watched for a while, and then, as there

was nothing they could do, they returned home, Smith giving voice to his opinion of the human race in general.

The next day was Saturday. The morning milk

was not delivered, so it was said, because the delivery man had gone off treasure hunting. And he, it transpired, was not the only one. As soon as school was over every boy and every master moved off to the diggings to see the treasure unearthed. Rumour had by this time been really busy. The farmer was taking out a summons against every trespasser on his land. The owner was taking out a summons against the farmer, who was only the tenant. The one ironmonger in the town had run out of picks and shovels, and treasure hunters were having to go far afield for their tools.

The story had got into the papers, and men on horseback, in carts and other vehicles, were converging on the ruins of Hertbury Abbey. Newspaper reporters were there.

Some were taking photographs. The Home Office and the British Museum had sent representatives to watch their interests.

As soon as Biggles came in sight of the field of operations he saw that rumour had for once fallen short of the mark. He was astounded by the spectacle. Scores of men, and even women, were now hard at work. The whole area resembled nothing so much as a battlefield. Paper that had contained sandwiches blew about. In the middle of it all, on a high mound, stood P.C. Grimble, trying to keep order ; for fights were frequent as men accused each other of coming too near ground already claimed. Spectators formed a cordon round the scene. The Head was among them.

In his indignation Smith waxed eloquent as he gave his opinion of claim-jumpers. He had, he told Biggles, read all about claim-jumping in a book on Australia. It was a common trick of unscrupulous rogues.

Biggles was thinking hard, for it had occurred to

him that the thing had gone far enough. "It wouldn't surprise me if there's a row about this," he told Smith anxiously. "It'll take an army to put all that dirt back into those holes.

"

"Jolly good job too," was Smith's view of it. "Serves them all right for jumping our claim. After all, we didn't ask them to dig."

"What they don't understand is, there may not be a treasure at all," remarked Biggles.

Smith had apparently overlooked this minor point. "That's right enough," he agreed. "But that's their look-out. Still, it's something to see, isn't it ? You can't see a treasure hunt of this size every day."

Mrs. Grummit appeared with her husband's tea. The farmer, looking hot and tired, came to fetch it. Drawing near, he saw Biggles and Smith standing there. "Those are the boys who have got the chart ! " he shouted, advancing quickly. "Come on, hand it over ! "

The Head stepped in. " Is this true, Bigglesworth, that you have the chart ? " he inquired.

" Smith tertius has it, sir," Biggles told him. "May I see it, Smith ? " requested the Head.

Smith passed it over.

The Head examined it with a curious expression on his face. " Where did you get this ? "

he asked in a peculiar voice.

" We made it, sir."

"Oh—you made it ? "

" Yes, sir."

"For what purpose ? "

"For fun, really, sir," put in Biggles. "Farrow, the roadman, found a coin near the ruins so we decided to go treasure hunting. We thought we ought to have a chart."

"So you made one ? "

" Yes, sir."

"Had you any reason for supposing that there was a treasure where you have put the red cross ? "

"None whatever, sir," confessed Smith. " It just seemed to be as good a place as any."

The corners of the Head's mouth twitched. "I see," he said seriously. "Did you induce all these people to come here and make fools of themselves ? "

" Indeed, we did not, sir," protested Smith hotly. "We had only just started digging when Mr. Grummit came along and drove us off. Then he started digging himself. He jumped our claim. Not only that, but he let the cat out of the bag. Now look what has happened, sir. We can't find anywhere to dig ourselves. It isn't fair ! "

" Quite so—quite so," murmured the Head. "He certainly let the cat out of the bag. But hasn't it occurred to you that these people are going to be rather annoyed with you when they learn how they've been wasting their time ? "

Smith looked surprised. "But why should they be angry with us, sir ? After all, we didn't ask them to dig. We were pretty sick about it—weren't we, Bigglesworth ? "

"Jolly sick," agreed Biggles.

"Well, I think if I were you I'd go back to school," said the Head confidentially. "I can't allow this nonsense to go on any longer. The sooner the truth is told the better."

"Very well, sir," answered Biggles.

What the boys did was move off to a safe distance, and from there watch the effect of the Head's announcement.

If the story of the treasure had spread swiftly, the revelation that there was no treasure spread even faster. Men, covered with grime, crawled out of the earth at all sorts of unexpected places. Some laughed. Some swore. " It was all started by a couple of kids playing ! " shouted one man as he put on his coat. Then began an exodus that, Smith alleged, somewhat vaguely, reminded him of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Grummit raved. "What about my pasture ? " he was yelling. "Stay here and fill in these holes, some of you ! " He shouted in vain. It was evident that the lust for moving earth had expired.

"Serves him jolly well right for jumping our claim," said Smith, with warm satisfaction. "

All the same, I think we'd better drop treasure hunting for a bit."

Biggles agreed.

"We'd better keep clear of old Grummit's farm, too."

Again Biggles agreed.

"It just shows what people are like," was Smith's final comment, as they walked back to school.

Once more Biggles could only agree.

The story got into the newspapers under the headline of The Great Treasure Hoax, and a laugh went up. But Biggles and Smith saw nothing funny in it. They had a feeling that they were not popular in Hertbury, and thought it prudent, for a little while, to keep away from the town that was their only shopping centre.

Ix

THE CHESTNUT WOOD

THE days passed, in the ordinary way, one very much as another, with nothing worth recording. Biggles settled down, and on the whole managed to keep out of trouble—

anyway, out of serious trouble.

There was a little unpleasantness with Mr. Bruce over so small a matter of letting off fireworks outside the master's study door on the eve of Guy Fawkes day. He had played the trick once and got away with it. This encouraged him to make the fatal mistake of trying to repeat it ; but on the second occasion it went wrong, and for his pains he took from the Head six slashing cuts of the cane, three on each hand, to discourage experiments of a like nature. The lesson he learned was not to try to repeat a success too soon or too often. He bore Mr. Bruce no malice, for he knew he was in the wrong. He merely felt that as it was the firework season Mr. Bruce might have seen the joke.

Indeed, that was his rather optimistic defence when he delivered the fatal slip of paper, outlining the offence, to the Head.

Said the Head, with a sort of caustic mirth : " You've had your little joke, Bigglesworth, now I'm going to have mine."

Biggles saw nothing funny in the Head's joke and spent the rest of the

day blowing on his hands. What actually happened was this. It must first be explained that the door of Mr. Bruce's study was a formidable piece of oak, dating back to the fifteenth century, when the school was built "to teach the sons of gentlemen Latin.

" Originally the latch had been a primitive device. To open the door it was merely necessary to insert a finger in a small hole provided for the purpose, and lift the latch.

The hole went right through the door. The latch had disappeared, but the hole remained.

By looking through it it was possible to see into the room. Wads of paper pushed in by the master were as promptly pushed out by boys passing the door, and the practice had in consequence been discarded.

It struck Biggles in passing that the hole might have been specially designed to hold a squib. He peeped in. Mr. Bruce was in his armchair, dozing by the fire. Into the hole went a squib. Biggles lighted the fuse and ran. He heard the explosion from a safe distance. He heard the door open and close. Silence returned.

It seemed to Biggles that this was rather good fun, and reasonably safe, so holding another squib in one hand and a box of matches in the other, he made a cautious advance and applied his eye to the hole. Something obstructed his view. At first he could not make out what it was. Then, with a spasm of horror, he saw that it was another eye, within an inch of his own. With a gasp of fright he turned to run, but he was too late. The door flew open and a voice cracked one word, " Bigglesworth ! " Realising that as he had been identified it was no use going on, Biggles came to a skidding stop, turned slowly, and even more slowly, returned. Feeling very small, he waited while Mr.

Bruce wrote a note to the Head and then carried it to the seat of judgement.

As a matter of detail he had some slight compensation for this unfortunate incident, in that Hervey, his arch-enemy, in an effort which Biggles suspected was intended to take the lustre from his own exploit, got into even hotter water. There were of course a lot of fireworks about, as there are at every school in the gunpowder season, and from morning till night the quad resounded to the bangs of maroons and the crackle of squibs. Roman candles squirted sparks in all directions.

It was during French class, at a period when Monsieur Bougade's face

was turned to the blackboard, that Hervey, lifting the lid of his desk, disclosed to an admiring audience his latest acquisition. This was one of those red, diabolical-looking fireworks, consisting of a fuse about eight inches long on which had been assembled about fifty small squibs. It was a beautiful piece of work, and all eyes were glistening when, on the point of the master turning back to the class (which it must be admitted Hervey judged very nicely) it had to be put out of sight.

Hervey showed it several times, and, like Biggles, encouraged by success, became more and more ambitious, even going through the actions of lighting it. Finally, when Monsieur was writing an unusually long sentence on the blackboard, he broke all previous records by actually lighting a match and making a pretence of applying it to the fuse. This time he cut things rather fine, and the desk was only half closed when the master, whose suspicions may have been aroused by the uncanny silence, spun round, eyes

sweeping the room for the cause of such unusually good behaviour.

It may have been due to haste that Hervey's rehearsal of the treat to come moved into the present tense. His demonstration of lighting the fuse had been most realistic. Too realistic, in fact, as was soon to be proved. At all events, as Monsieur Bougade was turning back to the board there was a good healthy explosion in Hervey's desk ; and this, after a brief interval, was followed by such a volume of sound as might have been made by a nest of machine-guns in action. It turned out later that Hervey had quite a lot of fireworks in his desk in addition to the masterpiece he had shown.

At that moment Biggles was genuinely sorry for Hervey. Hervey sat at his desk, white-lipped and wild-eyed, an expression of horror frozen on his face as if he had been stricken suddenly by some awful disease. In spite of his efforts to hold it down the top of his desk beat a brisk tattoo, every crack puffing smoke, while the hole that held the inkwell became a miniature volcano that erupted sparks and tongues of coloured fire.

Smoke rose in a cloud. In the midst of it sat Hervey, giving a wonderful impression of a martyr dying at the stake. For the best part of a minute the dreadful noise continued.

Then the reports became less frequent, and after a final whizzing sound, such as might have been made by an expiring Catherine wheel, the din subsided. Only the smoke continued to roll upwards. Hervey's

eyes closed. His body sagged. His head lolled. He appeared to be dead. A solemn bush fell.

The silence, following the uproar, was of suffocating quality. Nobody moved or spoke. It was as if the entire room had ceased to breathe. All eyes were on the victim of the tragedy, from whom all glory had departed. All hearts must have gone out to him. All, that is, except that of Monsieur Bougade. Standing on his rostrum with his lips parted, his breath coming fast, the French master gazed glassy-eyed into the smoke with the fixed expression of a man who sees a vision.

It was the coughing that broke out, as the acrid smoke filled every corner of the room, that appeared to restore him to consciousness. Not a word did he say. He went to his desk, wrote a note, folded the paper and, still without speaking, held it out. There was no need to say for whom it was intended.

Hervey rose like a sleep-walker, advanced, took the note, turned about, and walked slowly down the aisle in the manner of a prisoner going to execution. All eyes were still on him as he disappeared from sight. Monsieur Bougade opened some windows to let the smoke out and the class continued in the melancholy atmosphere of a funeral service.

It was half an hour before Hervey returned. His face was pallid and stained. His eyes were red, and his hands thrust deep into his trouser pockets. He slumped into his desk and sulked until the bell rang for break.

On the first Saturday afternoon in November Biggles had an adventure, or the first of several, that took all the joy out of his life, even though there were compensations. It was his first experience of real trouble, and he lost weight, not to mention sleep, under the strain of it.

The thing began, as so many things do, with an incident so small in itself that no degree of foresight could have foreseen the tragedy in which it was to end. The sweet chestnuts were now ripe, and as the district was well furnished with trees, the quad was soon littered with skins. Every boy, large and small, had chestnuts in his pocket, and a good deal of fun was had by roasting them over secret fires. Biggles decided to go chestnutting

, an enterprise in which Smith announced his willingness to participate. Smith pointed out, however, that as most of the trees in

the vicinity had been stripped, it would be necessary for them to go rather far afield, and suggested a raid on Foxley Wood.

Biggles had heard of Foxley Wood, and had in fact seen it from a distance. It was about two miles from the town and three hundred yards from the nearest point of the road. It was on the estate of Sir Colin Markland, who was not only a Justice of the Peace, but one of the Governors of the School. Not that that really mattered, Smith hastened to point out. The reason why no one ever—or very rarely—went near the wood was because it was the most jealously guarded covert of Mr. Samuel Barnes, gamekeeper to Sir Colin.

In Foxley Wood Mr. Barnes tended his pheasants as a mother tends an ailing child, and he had taken pains to let it be known at the school that any boy found trespassing in the wood could expect no mercy from him. The stick he carried, Smith admitted frankly, was not an ornament, and more than one boy during the past twenty years had felt the weight of it.

Actually, it was unnecessary for Smith to enlarge on the nature of Mr. Barnes. Biggles had heard a lot about him. He had heard how, after a fearful fight in which both men had been injured, he had caught the notorious Mick Dunnage, who was not only an habitual poacher but was also the worst character in the town, being a powerful, drunken brute who made a practice every Saturday night of beating his wife. For his last poaching offence, as he had several convictions against him, he was given six months' hard labour, from which he had recently returned home. Having given his wretched wife a good thrashing he let it be known that Barnes was next on his list for punishment.

As neither Barnes nor Dunnage were regarded with affection by anyone at the school, no sides were taken in the feud, it being felt that whatever the two men did to each other would be to the advantage of the community.

With this view Biggles was not entirely in agreement, for having spent a good deal of time with his uncle's keepers he realised that theirs was a thankless task. They were in a position of authority, yet had no uniform, like the police, to protect them. If they did their job well, and they were no use otherwise, they were regarded as officious and disliked on that account.

Biggles had often seen Mr. Barnes about, and held the secret opinion that his chief fault was that he was a very good gamekeeper. Once the

old man had nodded to him in passing, and Biggles suspected that his nature was probably not so black as it had been painted.

However that might be, Biggles resolved to take a chance in the wood where, according to report, the best and biggest chestnuts grew. It so happened, however, that on the Saturday afternoon for which

the project had been planned, Smith had gone sick with a toothache, which left Biggles with the choice of abandoning the raid or going alone. He decided that he would go alone. It might even be all to the good, he told himself, for his hunting trips in India had taught him that two people invariably make more noise than one, one reason being, of course, that two people talk.

So at two-thirty, without divulging his objective to a soul, blissfully unaware of the deep and dangerous waters for which he was heading, he set off. He had no reason to suspect anything worse than to be chased by an irate gamekeeper. That was the limit of his apprehensions.

It was a pleasant day for the time of the year. The sun shone without much heat in a pale blue sky unmarked by a cloud. The trees had lost most of their leaves, but enough remained to give colour to a landscape that was mostly flat and consisted of rolling fields of stubble with an occasional splash of green-topped turnips. At the corner of one field, by a group of cornstacks, smoke rose from a threshing machine. The voices of the men working there sounded curiously loud in the still air. In another field a man was following his plough, drawn slowly by a pair of grey horses and followed by a wheeling crowd of rooks. It was a typical autumnal scene, and the English countryside at its best.

The sun was already well down in the west when, at a little after three o'clock Biggles came within sight of his objective. It was on the left-hand side of the road, at a distance of some three hundred yards, the intervening area being occupied by a field of stubble. In the hedge that ran parallel with the road there presently appeared a gate, and from this another hedge ran back at right angles to the wood.

Biggles stopped at the gate and subjected the landscape to a long and careful scrutiny.

He had kept his eyes open for Mr. Barnes all the way from the town, but had not seen him. The wood, a sombre-looking rectangle of timber covering, perhaps six acres, looked—now that he was actually faced

by it—darkly forbidding, even sinister. Against a background of shadows the trunks of the outer trees stood erect like warning fingers.

There were no chestnut trees in sight, but these, Biggles had been informed, were roughly in the middle. Very carefully he turned his cap, with its tell-tale badge, inside-out.

As he climbed the gate his heart began to knock, for he knew that he was now on forbidden ground. After a last swift glance around, bending low he began to run along the hedge to escape as quickly as possible from a position in which he knew he was exposed. Safety, now, lay in the thick cover of the wood. He had nearly reached it when a hen pheasant burst with a whirr of wings from a tuft of grass under his feet. The shock made him flinch with a gasp of dismay, and after a short pause to recover himself it was almost in a panic that he covered the last few yards to the wood. Reaching it, he crouched against the foot of a tree, panting, looking about furtively, eyes and ears alert for danger, and ready to bolt at the first sign of it. All was as silent as a tomb. The only movement was an occasional dead leaf making a slow descent earthward to thicken the carpet already there.

The air was heavy with the tang of damp mould and rotting leaves.

It was the first time Biggles had knowingly trespassed on private ground, and even though the offence was not a serious one, in view of the harmless nature of his quest, the thumping of his heart made him painfully aware of it. No wood on his uncle's estate had ever looked like this. There the trees had been friendly, the branches beckoning. He knew it was imagination born of an awareness of what he was doing, but here there was something almost malevolent about the way the trees thrust out their branches to bar his progress, as if resentful of his intrusion. A distant jay screeched. He wished now that he had not started, but having done so he felt bound to go on. To retire would be to acknowledge himself to be a funk.

Moving without a sound from tree to tree, eyes active, and stopping frequently to listen, he made his way towards the middle of the wood. Once, on the ground, some scattered bones and feathers made him look up, and as the tree was almost destitute of leaves he had no difficulty in spotting a hawk's nest. Presently a stoat chattered at him from a hole in the root of a tree, before disappearing into it.

There was a track, or glade, he found, running lengthways through the wood. It was not so much a path as an open area about six yards wide that had not been planted with trees, which now consisted chiefly of

oaks and birches, with interlacing branches overhead. A little farther on he could see the golden gleam of chestnut trees. Around him, too, at almost regular intervals, there were thick, wide-spreading old rhododendron bushes, their dark green leaves looking almost black in the twilight of the shadows. Their purpose there in a pheasant covert was, he knew, to provide shelter for the pheasants in hard weather. Here and there, yellow sunlight filtered through the trees to make splashes of colour on the layer of fallen leaves that everywhere covered the ground. A glance up and down and he went on quickly to the chestnuts, on his way picking up a length of dead wood for the purpose of beating the husks open.

At the sight that presently greeted his eyes his lips parted with satisfaction, for rumour had not lied. Here were nuts in plenty, great fat husks that had sometimes burst open on contact with the ground to discharge their shining contents. Choosing the biggest he began to fill his pockets.

So engrossed was he in this occupation that the vigilance that he had until now employed was to some extent relaxed ; and it was the cackle of a disturbed cock pheasant somewhere at the far end of the wood that brought him back with a start to the realisation of where he was. He stood tense, listening. Something, he knew, must have flushed the pheasant. What was it ? A prowling fox ? A poaching cat ? He stood quite still.

A minute later, with a rustle of dead leaves, a cock pheasant came running—as only an alarmed cock pheasant can run—down a rabbit track beside the path. This told him much. He knew now that a fox was not the disturbing influence, for had that been so the bird would simply have flown into the nearest convenient tree, and from safety clucked a warning to its kind. There was somebody in the wood beside himself. It was, he had no doubt, Mr. Barnes the gamekeeper.

He began to back away into the undergrowth with the object of beating a swift and silent retreat ; and presently he was to wish fervently that he had persisted in this project. But a curious thing happened. The pheasant came to a dead stop and began to throw itself about in a most astonishing manner, at the same time giving a series of choking gasps.

For a few seconds Biggles stared, his eyes wide with surprise, at this extraordinary performance ; then a frown knitted his forehead as he perceived what had happened. The pheasant had run into a snare and was held by the neck.

His first reaction was to rush out and release the bird ; and he was already moving forward with that object when running footsteps sent him scurrying back into the nearest cover, which was provided by a handy tangle of rhododendron. Into this he crept, and squatted, with heart pounding and hands trembling from dismay. He could still see the pheasant.

Then, into his view burst the runner—or runners, for there were two of them. And neither was Mr. Barnes. To Biggles' unbounded astonishment they were two boys ; and although their jackets and caps were inside out he recognised them instantly. They were Hervey and Brickwell. He went, literally, stiff from shock. Hervey was carrying a sack under his arm. There seemed to be something in it.

"Here's one," said Brickwell in a tense whisper, and swerved towards the kicking pheasant.

In a moment both boys were on their knees beside it, one holding it while the other with feverish haste strove to loosen the noose which had of course been drawn tight by the bird's efforts to free itself.

This operation was not completed. Brickwell, who was holding the bird, looked over his shoulder nervously—as he had every reason to. With a hiss of " Cave ! " he was on his feet, running like a deer. Hervey lost no time in following him, and within a few seconds they were lost to sight in the shadows.

Hard on this came heavier footsteps and into sight burst Mr. Barnes, red of face and black of brow. With his stick waving he paused for a moment to roar : "Stop, you young devils ! " and then rushed on in the track of the two boys. His footsteps died away.

Biggles, who by this time was nearly swooning with fright and consternation, sprang to his feet. His eyes were on the pheasant, now obviously at its last gasp. He dashed over to it, released it, and looking round as it fluttered away saw the burly Mr. Barnes hastening back towards the spot. As a hard-pressed rabbit dives into its burrow he shot back into the rhododendron bush and lay still, holding his breath to steady his madly-racing heartbeats.

Mr. Barnes, panting, went straight to the snare. He stared at it. He looked around, muttering. He took off his hat and mopped his forehead with a large white-spotted red handkerchief. He looked again at the snare, obviously wondering what had happened to the bird. He swore softly. Then, very deliberately, he tore the snare out of the

ground, rolled the wire round the peg, and put it in his pocket. For the minute or two that he remained there, looking up and down, he had Biggles' deepest sympathy ; but Biggles did not choose that moment to express it. It was not

the time, he thought, to make the acquaintance of Mr. Barnes.

Presently the gamekeeper, still muttering under his breath, strode off.

As the rustle of dry leaves died away Biggles gave vent to his relief in a shuddering intake of breath. He, too, mopped his forehead with a handkerchief already damp. Apart from that he did not move. Anxious as he was to depart, he had no intention of stirring while there was the slightest chance of Mr. Barnes still being in the vicinity. He felt that if he could once get his feet on the high road he would never leave it again.

As his nerves relaxed he was better able to ponder on what he had seen, and his thoughts were anything but reassuring. The knowledge that Hervey and Brickwell were in the wood to poach pheasants gave him a weak feeling in the legs. As much as he disliked them he could not have imagined them engaging in a pursuit so criminal, for that was what it was. Nor could he think of a reason for it. What could they do with the pheasants when they caught them ? He could only suppose that they were doing it from a sheer lust of hurting something.

He continued to squat in his rhododendron bush. The sun, which he could glimpse through the trees, was now a great red disc balanced on the horizon. The shadows deepened. A cock pheasant, with a loud cackle, went up to roost. Another followed, and another. Biggles counted them automatically, for this was a game he had often played with his uncle's keepers. They were expected to know how many birds they had in their coverts, for thus could a check be kept on poaching activities. As darkness closed in, and no more birds went up, Biggles knew that there were forty-seven cock pheasants in the wood.

He dare wait no longer. Straightening his cramped limbs he began moving with the utmost caution towards where he judged the nearest fringe of the wood to be. In the dark silence it was nervy work, for every sound, the rustle of a leaf or the crack of a twig, was magnified tenfold. Slow and careful though his movements were he found it impossible to proceed without a certain amount of noise. He derived a crumb of satisfaction from the knowledge that such conditions cut two

ways, in that Mr. Barnes would be similarly handicapped should he still be on the prowl.

The edge of the wood was reached at last, and such was Biggles' urgency to get away from it that he cast precautions to the wind and raced across the stubble as though the keeper was actually on his track. He did not trouble to look for the gate. Scrambling over the hedge he fell on the road, dawn which he continued to run as fast as he could put one foot before another.

It was quite dark by the time he reached the town. The lamplighter with his pole was going his round. Several gas lamps had already been lit, and it may have been a guilty conscience that made Biggles haunt the shadows. He became aware of two figures in front of him, which, oddly enough, seemed to be doing the same thing. In the light of a shop window he made them out to be Hervey and Brickwell. Hervey, he noticed, still carried the sack. This surprised Biggles, for after what had happened he had supposed that they would be back at school long ago. Deciding that it would be better if they did not see him he

hung back. At the same time he kept an eye on them for fear Hervey should take the opportunity of catching him alone to give him a hiding for the conker affair.

Suddenly they disappeared. Biggles stopped, sensing danger, and ready to run. He could not see them anywhere. Just ahead, at the corner shop of Mr. Jeremiah Siggins, the local

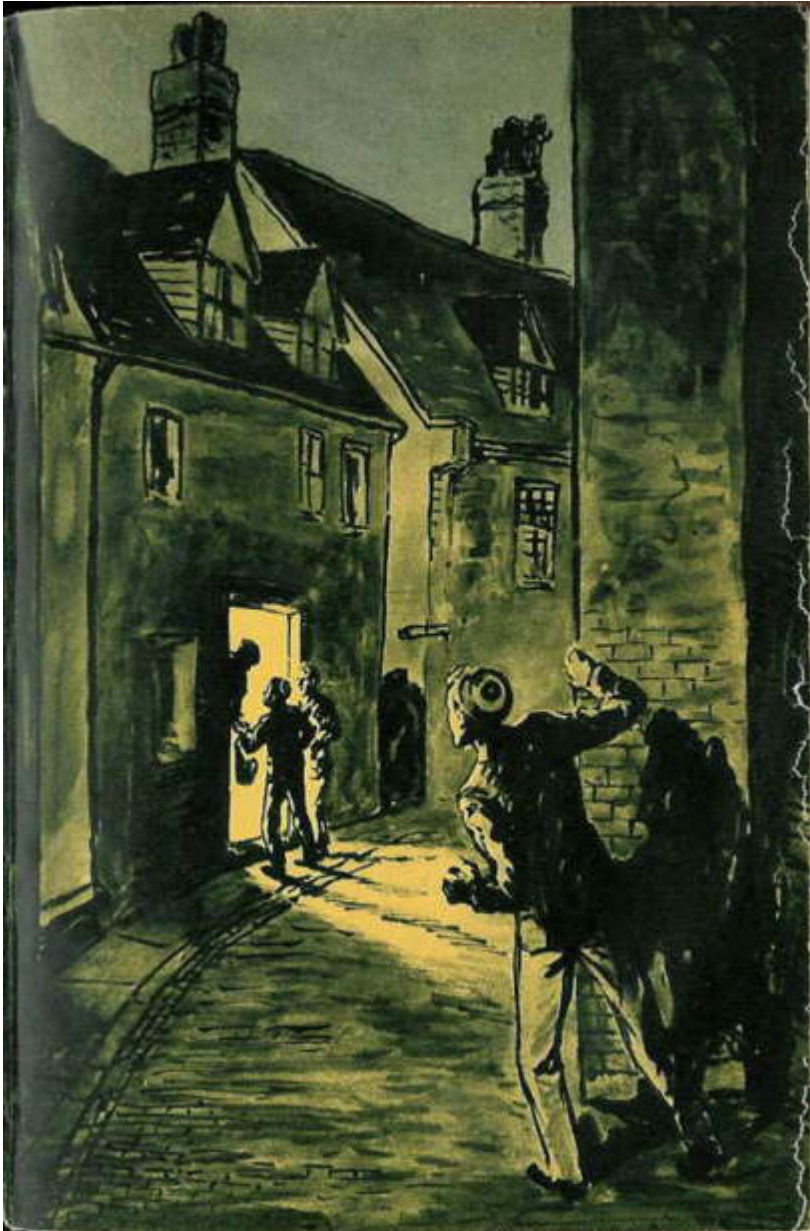
butcher, a lane turned off to the left. Had they seen him and were waiting for him there ?

He approached it with caution, and peeped, round the brickwork. A shaft of lamplight fell across the lane from a door that had been opened —presumably the back door of Mr.

Siggins. Voices were talking in low tones. There was a chink of money. He heard Hervey say : "Thank you, Mr. Siggins." The door was shut. Biggles pressed himself against the wall. The two boys passed within five yards but did not see him ; they were too interested in what they were doing. Again came a chink of coins. "That's your share," said Hervey, as the boys went on. As they passed under the next street lamp Biggles saw that Hervey no longer carried the sack.

Feeling sick from shock it was a full minute before he moved. All was now plain. Hervey and Brickwell were not only poachers, but poachers of the worst sort. An excuse might be made for a man who

poached an occasional rabbit for the pot ; but Hervey and Brickwell had no such excuse. They were poaching for money. Not only were they guilty of killing game, they were also guilty of selling it without a licence. No wonder they always had plenty of pocket money, thought Biggles bitterly.



Miserable under the burden of his unpleasant secret he returned to

school. That night he slept badly for the first time. Haunted by dreams in which Barnes, Hervey, Brickwell, Grimble the policeman and Siggins the butcher were all in conflict in a dark wood from which there was no escape, he tossed on a bed that got harder as the long night wore on.

And this, he thought, dolefully, for a few chestnuts. It wasn't worth it. His only comfort was that he, at any rate, was out of the wood, in every sense of the word. He would take jolly good care, he resolved, never to be mixed up in anything of the sort again.

It was perhaps fortunate for him that he could not foresee the events that the next day were to bring.

X

ON THE MAT

THE first indication that the Foxley Wood affair might not yet have ended came the next day, after church, when the general assembly bell clanged its unmusical summons. This was an unusual event and only occurred when an announcement of considerable importance was to be made by the Head. Wherefore, as the boys filed into the Big School there was a good deal of animated speculation as to the cause.

Biggles had no reason to suppose that the gathering was in any way connected with him, personally ; but he had a guilty conscience, and it was with inward misgivings that he took his place in the section of the

hall reserved for his form. It was the first time he had seen the whole school assembled for such an occasion, and the spectacle did nothing to ease his qualms. Prefects were standing at intervals. All the masters were present, in their caps and gowns, standing in line down the aisle, looking very grave. Then into the room came the Head, followed by an elderly gentleman dressed in a rather old tweed suit. Both mounted the rostrum. The Head indicated a chair to his companion, who sat down. The Head remained standing.

Advancing to the front of the rostrum he clapped his hands for quiet. An attentive silence fell.

At his first words Biggles' stomach seemed to slide down into his boots.

Said the Head, in a loud clear voice : "Were there any boys of this school in Foxley Wood yesterday afternoon ? If so, will they stand up."

Biggles, resigned to his fate, rose slowly to his feet.

The Head's eyes, as hard as glass, went round the room. "Who else was in Foxley Wood yesterday ? " Nobody moved.

The Head turned to the man in the chair, who said : "There were at least two."

Again the Head turned to the school. "Who else was in Foxley Wood yesterday afternoon ? "

There was not a movement.

"Very well," said the Head shortly, in a tone of voice that Biggles did not like. "

Biggletworth, step forward."

Biggles advanced to the front of the school. "Come up here."

Biggles mounted the rostrum.

The Head squared himself in front of him. "Who was with you in Foxley Wood yesterday

? " "Nobody, sir."

"Are you asking me to believe that you were alone ? "

"I was by myself, sir."

"Do you usually go out alone ? "

"No, sir. I usually go out with another boy, but yesterday he was not well and stayed in."

"So you insist that you were alone ? "

" Yes, sir."

"Why did you go to Foxley Wood ? "

"To get some chestnuts, sir."

"You knew you were trespassing ? "

" Yes, sir."

"What did you see in Foxley Wood besides chestnuts ? "

"I saw a stoat, sir, and a hawk's nest."

"Anything else ? "

"I saw two pheasants."

"You saw—two pheasants ? "

" Yes, sir."

"In what circumstances did you see these pheasants ? "

"I flushed one, a hen, just before I got to the wood, sir. Afterwards, when I was in the wood, I heard a cock cackle, and saw another one running."

"Did you—er—er—touch any of these pheasants?" " I touched one, sir."

"Oh. So you touched one ? Why ? "

" Because it was in a snare, sir. I released it."

The Head glanced at the seated man, then turned back to Biggles.

"You let it go ? "

" Yes, sir."

"You're quite sure you let it go ? "

" Quite sure, sir."

"You didn't kill it ? "

"No, sir. I had no reason to. I didn't want it. All I wanted was chestnuts. If I wanted pheasants my uncle has plenty on his place. He has invited me to shoot in the holidays."

The Head cleared his throat. "Then you didn't set the snare ? "

"No, sir. I've never set a snare in my life, sir."

The Head paused for a moment. When he spoke again he did so slowly and deliberately.

"Had you any reason to think there was another person in the wood

beside yourself ? "

"Not at first, sir ; but later on, yes."

"What led you to think there was someone else, there ? "

"I heard a cock pheasant cackle an alarm. I hoped it was a fox that had put it up, but when I saw another one running I knew then that someone else was in the wood."

"Did you see this person ? "

Biggles was silent.

"I asked you a question, Bigglesworth. Speak up, boy ! "

" Yes, sir."

"You saw someone ? "

" Yes, sir."

"Did you recognise him ? "

" Yes sir."

" Who was it ? "

"Mr. Barnes the gamekeeper, sir."

"What was Mr. Barnes doing ? "

"He came running down the glade. I heard him coming and hid in a bush. The pheasant had just run into the snare. Mr. Barnes didn't stop, so as soon as he'd gone past I ran out and let the pheasant go."

"Then what did you do ? "

"Seeing Mr. Barnes coming back I went to the bush and sat still, sir."

"So you remained on the spot ? "

"Yes, sir. I waited for a long time after Mr. Barnes had gone."

"Doing what ? "

"Counting the pheasants, sir."

"Counting the pheasants ! "

Yes, sir. There were forty-seven cocks, I remember. I heard them go up to roost."

"Was that of interest to you ? "

"Not particularly, sir, but I had nothing else to do. I was really waiting for Mr. Barnes to go because I didn't want to be caught. When I thought he had gone I came back to school."

"With some chestnuts ? "

" Yes, sir."

"Nothing else ? "

" Nothing, sir."

Said the man in tweeds, quietly : "If he saw Barnes he must have seen the others. Barnes was chasing them when he passed the bird in the snare."

The Head drew a deep breath, and considered Biggles through half-closed eyes. "Did you see anyone else besides Mr. Barnes in Foxley Wood yesterday ? "

Biggles was silent.

"I'm waiting for an answer," said the Head sternly. " Yes, sir," blurted Biggles.

"Were they boys of this school ? "

Biggles knew he was trapped, and gave himself up for lost. He turned stricken eyes to the Head's face, but they found no sympathy there. "Yes, sir," he answered, in a low voice.

" Ah," said the Head. "You must realise, Bigglesworth, that this is a serious matter, and you would be well advised to tell the truth."

" I'm telling the truth, sir," muttered Biggles. "Did you recognise these boys ? "

" Yes, sir."

"How many were there ? "

" Two, sir."

"What are their names ? "

Biggles moistened his lips. " I'm sorry, sir, but I can't tell you that."

" You refuse to say ? "

" Yes, sir."

"Were they friends of yours ? "

" No, sir."

The Head faced the room. "Two more boys in this room were in Foxley Wood yesterday.

They will stand up."

No one moved.

The Head's voice took on a harder tone. "If the two boys will not own up I shall have no alternative than to punish the entire school. Now, who were they ? "

Silence.

"Very well," said the Head grimly. "The Wednesday half-holiday is cancelled until further notice."

A whisper, like a fitful breeze, swept through the hall.

The Head turned to Biggles, but before he could speak the other man on the rostrum put in : "May I have a word with this boy, Colonel Chase ? "

"Certainly, Sir Colin."

This was the first proof Biggles had that the tweed-clad man was Sir Colin Markland, the owner of Foxley Wood, although he had of course suspected it.

"Might I speak to him alone ? " asked Sir Colin. "I'd rather the other boys didn't hear what I have to say."

"By all means." The Head turned to the hall and said curtly : "School will dismiss."

"Tell me, my boy," said Sir Cohn quietly when the boys had gone, although the Head remained. "You seem to know something about game preservation. May I take it that you have never been guilty of poaching ? "

"I've never poached anything in my life, sir," said Biggles firmly. "After all, I've never had any reason to."

"As a sportsman you would naturally dislike poachers ? "

" I loath them, sir," returned Biggles earnestly. "You knew that poaching was going on in my wood yesterday ? "

"Only after I was in it, sir. Had I known before I wouldn't have gone near the place ! "

Sir Colin smiled at Biggles' vehemence. "You actually saw the poaching going on ? "

"Yes, sir, I did."

"Why didn't you go to Mr. Barnes when you saw him, and report what you had seen ? "

"Because I was afraid, sir, if he saw me, he wouldn't give me a chance to explain anything. I was scared. Besides, I didn't like the idea of bringing disgrace on the school."

"Well, that's understandable," conceded Sir Colin. "I believe your story," he went on, "

because it confirms all that I have been told by Barnes. It explains the mystery of how the pheasant got out of the snare. That puzzled us. Now, you know these poachers, so this is what I suggest. You see, I should be very sorry to see the whole school punished for the misdeeds of two misguided boys. I'm not going to ask you to sneak. But I will ask you to go to these fellows and warn them that if you ever see them on my ground again you will divulge their names. That's fair enough, and, I think, it should put an end to this unpleasant business of poaching."

" Yes, sir, I'll do that," promised Biggles.

"Could we accept their word, do you think, if they promised not to poach again ? "

"I don't know about that, sir ; but I could soon tell if the poaching was still going on by occasionally counting the birds as they go up to roost."

"You made it forty-seven yesterday ? "

" Yes, sir."

"A month ago I put down a hundred cock pheasant poults in that wood, so somebody has been busy."

Biggles stared. "I can't think that two boys could kill more than fifty pheasants, sir!" he exclaimed, aghast.

"Well, it rather looks like it, doesn't it ?—although there's always a chance of a few birds wandering away. It's a bit hard on me, don't you agree, to pay a lot of money for birds and then have them all poached ? "

"I call it scandalous," agreed Biggles emphatically. His brain was working fast, trying to work out how much money the poachers must have made by their nefarious transactions.

Sir Colin got up. "There's just one other thing I'd like you to do," he said. "As a matter of proper behaviour I think you ought to go to Mr. Barnes and apologise to him for trespassing in his best covert."

This suggestion made small appeal to Biggles but he had perforce to consent.

"This afternoon would be a good time," said Sir Colin. "You'll find him at his cottage."

" Very well, sir."

"All right. That's all I have to say."

Biggles turned to the Head. "Do you want me any more, sir ? "

"No, you may go."

Biggles turned about and walked away, shaken by his interrogation, but conscious that the thing had not turned out as badly as at one time appeared inevitable. As he entered the quad he saw Hervey and

Brickwell making frantic signals to him from behind the fives court. Walking over to them, he saw they were both in a state of nervous agitation, which was not to be wondered at.

"Did you sneak ? " demanded Hervey in a hoarse whisper.

Biggles' lips curled. "What do you take me for ? " Hervey drew a deep breath of relief.

"What did they say after we'd gone out ? " asked Brickwell.

"That's my business," returned Biggles evenly. "But I have something to say to both of you. If ever again I hear of you being in Foxley Wood, or poaching anywhere else, I shall go straight to the Head and report it."

Hervey clenched his fist and raised it threateningly. "You'll what ? " he cried furiously.

"You heard what I said," Biggles told him calmly. "You've got off pretty well, but if you'

re going to take that attitude I'll go straight back to the Head and tell him all I know."

"How much do you know ? " asked Brickwell, with more than a shade of anxiety in his voice.

"You'd be surprised," replied Biggles contemptuously, and turning on his heel walked away.

He wondered how they would feel if he told them how much he did know.

He still had his penance to perform, and he was not looking forward to it. This was the making of his personal apology to Mr. Barnes. The sensation induced by the thought was rather like that of going to a dentist ; but since the thing had to be faced, he'd better get it over, he decided. Wherefore, as soon as dinner was over he set off for the keeper's cottage.

Turning the whole matter over in his mind, he saw clearly the unenviable position into which his escapade had landed him. He was the possessor of a secret which a lot of people would like to share. He, and he alone, knew who had been poaching the squire's pheasants. From the Head, or Sir Colin, he knew he had nothing to fear ; but if

Hervey and Brickwell had hated him before, what would be their feelings now, aware, as they were, that he had only to open his mouth to bring about their expulsion from school, if nothing worse. It was all a nasty business, he soliloquised, as he strode along. And all for nothing. He could not even enjoy the chestnuts for which he had paid, and was still paying, a heavy price. The nuts were like sawdust in his mouth.

His nerves tightened as he reached the cottage and saw the gamekeeper standing at his door. He opened the little wicket gate, closed it behind him, and marched, feeling very small, up the garden path.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Barnes," he greeted in a rather shaky voice.

"Good afternoon, young man," returned the keeper, standing legs apart, thumbs in the armpits of his waistcoat, and on his face an expression of chilly disfavour.

Biggles came to a stop and braced himself. "I have come, Mr. Barnes, to apologise to you for trespassing in Foxley Wood yesterday afternoon, thereby causing you a good deal of trouble. I promise not to enter the wood again without permission from you."

The gamekeeper did not answer for a full minute, and Biggles found the suspense more difficult to bear than the instant reproach he expected. Then the keeper replied : "So that'

s what you've come to tell me, is it ? "

"Yes, Mr. Barnes."

"I see." Mr. Barnes thought heavily. "And what do you reckon I ought to do about it ? "

"I hope you'll accept my apology, although that is a matter for you to decide," said Biggles simply.

Then, to his astonishment, the keeper actually smiled. "Come over here and let's have a talk about it," he said, with a change of tone, and led the way to a rustic bench under the front window. Biggles sat. Mr. Barnes sat, and loaded a silver-mounted pipe with slow deliberation. "I was expecting you," he admitted. "Sir Colin called on his way home."

"Oh, he did ? " Biggles had not expected that.

"He did. And he tells me you know who's been poachin' my birds."

"I do," admitted Biggles. "I wish I didn't," he added, with some warmth.

"And you ain't going ter split on 'em ? "

"I can't, Mr. Barnes. That would be sneaking. You see, if I did I wouldn't be able to show my face at the school again. Sneaking is unpardonable."

"Even though it's a matter of poaching ? "

"Yes. If it were anyone else but boys at the school it would be different, of course."

"That's what I understood from Sir Colin. Rum behaviour, I calls it. Still, if it's the rule, it's the rule. Sir Colin tells me you counted forty-seven birds up ? "

"That's what I made it."

"Don't you reckon that's pretty tough on me ? I started the nestin' season with a nice lot of birds In that covert. Then Sir Colin lets me 'ave a hundred more ter make a nice show.

Three days ago, when I last counted 'em, I was down ter fifty-one. Now you tell me there's only forty-seven. At this rate, by the time the gentlemen come fer the shootin'

there won't be a feather on the place. They'll expect me ter show 'em some birds. What are they goin' ter say when all I can show 'em is a few hens ? They'll think I'm a pretty poor sort of keeper, won't they ? "

"Yes, indeed they will," admitted Biggles frankly. "You know, Mr. Barnes, there's something queer about that. I can't believe two boys could clear a covert of birds at that rate."

"Seems funny, I'll own. But if there's anyone else at it 'e's been too smart for me. I'm single-handed 'ere and I have ter sleep sometime. I've watched the road leadin' from the town for hours and hours, but I might as well 'ave been in bed."

Biggles frowned. "I wonder if I could help you ? " he suggested, on the spur of the moment.

The keeper took his pipe from his mouth and gave Biggles a long look.

" You ? How do you reckon you could help ? "

"Well, in India I was reckoned to be pretty good at tracking," explained Biggles. "I might see something. In any case, I had an idea as I walked here of counting your birds up again—not by going into the wood, of course. You see, I've told the chaps who did the poaching that if I saw them in the wood again I'd report them. By counting the birds I could check if the poaching has stopped."

" H'm. Maybe there's something in that," conceded Mr. Barnes.

Biggles pressed his point. "Even now I can tell you that you've got a sparrow hawk and at least one stoat in the wood. They're not nice things to have about."

"Oh, I have, have I ? "

"Yes, Mr. Barnes."

"Tell me where ? "

Biggles obliged with the information.

"You know how to keep your eyes open, I see," observed the keeper.

"I've been living with my uncle, who has a good shoot," explained Biggles. "I went out a lot with the keepers. They gave me tips on how to spot things because they could see I was interested."

"In that case you ought to 'ave known better than to go into my wood," remarked Mr.

Barnes, with a twinkle in his eyes.

"I was careful not to disturb the birds," said Biggles quickly. "I was as quiet as a mouse.

After all, I was within a few yards of you when you were swearing, and you didn't see me."

The keeper smiled. "Oh, you were ? " He tapped his pipe on his heel. "All right. Now let'

s make a bargain, you and me. We'll call you my under-keeper, shall we say ? You can help me keep an eye on things. If you see anything suspicious, let me know. That means you can go anywhere on my ground you like, provided you don't make too much noise.

You catch these poachers for me and we'll call it quits about this 'ere trespassing."

Biggles was amazed and overjoyed. He had expected that the conversation would take a very different line. "I say, that's awfully decent of you, Mr. Barnes " he blurted. "I'll do my best, you may be sure."

"Then let's call it settled." The keeper clapped Biggles on the shoulder. " Wot would yer say to a nice cup o' tea and a bit of cake ? "

"I'd love it," declared Biggles, wondering if he was hearing aright.

"Then let's go and see wot Mrs. Barnes can find." They went in.

An hour later Biggles walked back to school treading on air, as the saying is. Mr. Barnes, he decided, was a very much maligned man. At that moment he would have done anything for him. He felt that he had made a friend, and at a time when he needed one.

He little guessed how short-lived the friendship was to be.

Xi

DARK DOINGS

BIGGLES still had doubts and misgivings about Hervey and Brickwell, whom there was reason to suppose had been augmenting their pocket money for some time in a way which no one had suspected. That they would miss this secret source of wealth were it suddenly cut off, was certain ; and whatever they might say to the contrary they would not readily forego it. They had by their attitude at the general assembly revealed that they were unscrupulous, in that they were prepared to let the whole school suffer for their misdeeds. That the punishment, the loss of the half-holiday, had been cancelled later by the Head, was due to no effort on their part. It had, Biggles knew, been brought about by the intervention of Sir Colin.

Hervey and Brickwell now kept closer together than ever before. When they were to be seen at all they

were always alone, with their heads together in earnest conversation, like the conspirators they were. What in particular made Biggles suspicious was the way they disappeared out of school hours. He did not trouble to follow them, but in the circumstances he wondered where they went and what they were doing.

There was now a spell of wet weather, and it was not until the following week-end that he was able to get out. On the Saturday morning, however, the sky cleared, and in the afternoon he decided to take a walk as far as Foxley Wood, and there check his suspicions by counting the pheasants as they went up to roost. He decided to go alone, for he realised that to take Smith with him would be to lay himself open to questions that he preferred not to answer. Smith, as his friend, had already expressed a natural curiosity as to the identity of the poachers.

He reached the wood without incident, and was able to approach it with sensations very different from those of the previous occasion. Now that he was acting by the gamekeeper's invitation the wood had lost its sinister character. It looked just what it was, an ordinary pheasant covert, and it was with confidence that he strode along the hedge leading to it. He noticed that more leaves were down, otherwise everything was the same. The rhododendrons, being evergreens, still held their leaves.

He started by making a quiet survey of the wood, without troubling to take any precautions against being seen ; for the two boys with whom he was chiefly concerned, Hervey and Brickwell, were still hanging about the school yard when he left it, as if they had no intention of going out. He examined the ground thoroughly, half afraid that he might find snares ; but if there were any they escaped his observation.

Taking his time, he walked slowly round the outside of the wood. On the opposite side from the one by which he had entered there had been stubble, but this was now under the plough. The top end, which he approached from the inside of the wood, he found protected by a tall chestnut-paling fence, the sort that consists of thin staves of wood at six-inch intervals held in place by twisted wire. Here, on a board, had been affixed the notice : Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted. By Order. And the reason for this, he assumed, was because a footpath—a narrow strip of bare ground, little used, by the look of it—

touched here the fringe of the wood before going off at an angle towards the village of Hayford. In the other direction he supposed it to join the main road to Hertbury. Whether this was a public footpath, or merely an accommodation track for farm labourers to get to their work, he did not know. He was not sufficiently interested to give the matter thought. He was on the wrong side of the fence, anyway, and he did not think he could get over it. He would have to go some distance to get round it, and as he had no particular reason for going on the path he decided not to trouble.

Although the sky was clear, with a touch of frost in the air, the short November day was now drawing to a close. Already the moon, nearly full, was riding high, and he expected at any moment to hear the first cock go up to roost. He had seen several birds walking in from the fields, where they had been feeding. He remained near the fence, just inside the wood. Finding a fallen tree that provided a seat he sat down to wait. Presently, with a whirr of wings and the usual crowing, the first bird went up to roost. Others followed in quick succession. Biggles kept count. The tally stopped at forty-two. He sat still, praying that this was only an interval before the rest went up ; but as time passed, and silence prevailed, his heart sank. Forty-two ! The last time he had counted the birds there had been forty-seven. Five more had gone. It looked as if Hervey and Brickwell were still at their stricks.

Sick at heart at the thought of the trouble which he knew must follow his report, he stood up, prepared to return to school, for daylight had now given way to moonlight and the air was getting chilly. He had taken only a few steps when he was brought to a halt by a sound for which he was so little prepared that he went rigid in the position in which it found him. It was the crack of a rifle. It was followed by a thump, which told its own story. A pheasant had been shot in a tree, and had fallen. There was no other explanation. From the wood came no other sound.

Biggles stood still, staring in the direction of the shot, which had seemed to come from deep in the wood. At all events, there was no doubt whatever that the shot had been fired by someone in the wood. Who was shooting pheasants by moonlight ? Was this why so many birds were going ? Did it mean that Hervey and Brickwell had now acquired a rifle

?

It may seem a little odd that even then it did not occur to him that there might be someone else engaged in the same unlawful occupation ; but then, the two boys were very much on his mind, and as he knew them to be poachers, and this their hunting-ground, he did not look elsewhere for the culprits.

While he stood there, tense, listening, trying to make up his mind what to do for the best, wondering if it would be possible to bring the gamekeeper to the spot before the poacher had gone, his nerves quivered to the crack of another shot. This time there was no thump, which suggested that the bullet had missed its mark. He stood still,

muscles flexed, for this was real poaching within the meaning of the law, a criminal offence, very different from the first occasion, when the snaring, having taken place in daylight, would come under the legal definition of trespass in pursuit of game, for which the penalties were less severe.

He stared back into the black wood. There were no more shots. Nothing moved. An ominous silence brooded.

How long he stood there he did not know, but it could not have been very long—perhaps two or three minutes, which in such circumstances can seem a long time. The silence was then broken by a sound that threw his brain into a whirl, and sent him hurrying back to his tree, beside which he lay with his heart palpitating uncomfortably. Footsteps were coming towards him from the heart of the wood, quick footsteps that made a loud rustle in the dead leaves. Hardly able to breathe for the beating of his heart, he lay still, staring.

A figure emerged from the trees within a dozen paces of him, a figure so burly that he knew at once that it was neither of the boys. For a brief instant, from its bulk, he thought it might be Barnes ; but this hope faded when he saw what the man carried. There were two objects. The first was a pheasant, held by the neck, and the other was a light rifle with a skeleton stock, such as is often supplied with a gun or rifle of the folding type, and is usually known as a poacher's gun, since there is no reason for an honest man to put his gun out of sight.

The man seemed to be in a hurry, and also, judging from his deep breathing, in a state of considerable agitation. He went on towards the fence, and there stopped to stare back into the wood. In doing so the moonlight fell full on his face. Biggles saw a square, pugnacious jaw, a broad, flat nose, shaggy eyebrows, and a low, animal forehead. He knew the man at once, for he had often seen him about. It was Mick Dunnage, the local professional poacher and jail-bird.

Dunnage cleared his throat, spat, and walked right up to the fence—much to Biggles'

surprise, for he wondered how he was going to get over it. The first thing Dunnage did there was to beat the head of the pheasant, which apparently was not quite dead, on one of the thick straining-posts. Satisfied that life was extinct, he put the bird in an inside pocket of his jacket. He then folded the gun across the middle and put it down his corduroy trousers. His next action was to bend and creep through the fence. This astonished Biggles, for there was no sound of breaking

wood, as would certainly be necessary to make a gap. On the far side of the fence the man stooped again as if to do something to it. Then he got up and strode away quickly, not towards the Hartbury road, as Biggles expected, but by the footpath that ran across the fields to Hayford.

Biggles gave him five minutes before he moved, for he was—let us admit it—badly scared. Then he went to the fence where Dunnage had used it and the mystery was soon explained. Three of the staves had been broken. After Dunnage had made his exit he had carefully fitted the ends together so that the fractures would not be noticed. It was obvious that the gap had not just been made, for it would be impossible to break the staves without a good deal of noise as the wood splintered. The gap, therefore, had been made on a previous occasion, and it seemed likely that Dunnage had used it regularly to get in and out of the wood at a spot which would seem most unlikely, and would not therefore be watched.

Biggles went through the gap, and taking care not to step on the footpath, arranged the broken staves behind him just as Dunnage had done. This completed to his satisfaction he turned his attention to the path. He knew that the heavy rain of the past few days must have obliterated any old tracks that might have been on it. For the same reason the ground would be soft. Any tracks, therefore, would have been made by the man who had just walked on it. Striking a match from the box he carried in his pocket he was not surprised by what he saw. Immediately behind the gap, clearly defined in the mud, was the imprint of the sole of a heavy nailed boot, metal-tipped and heeled. Examining it closely, he observed that the hobnails had been set in groups of three, each making an impression like a shamrock leaf. Two of the nails had come out, leaving these particular clusters incomplete. So clear was the mark, and so outstanding were its peculiarities that Biggles knew that he would have no difficulty in picking it out from a thousand. The marks were repeated down the path which Dunnage had taken.

He had by this time got over his initial shock, but he was still in doubt as to what he should do. His first inclination was to run to Sam Barnes' house, hoping to find him in, to tell him what he had seen. But the cottage was some distance off. Time was getting on, and even now, unless he hurried back to school, he would be late. Moreover, Dunnage had gone, and would no doubt be miles away before Barnes could get to the spot. The chance of catching him that night was remote. A better plan, he decided, would be to go to the gamekeeper's cottage the next day and make his report. That Dunnage would visit

the wood again seemed certain, and if Sam Barnes knew the secret of the fence he would be able to wait there and catch the poacher red-handed.

Having made his decision, Biggles walked quickly to the main road, and reaching it, set off at a run for the school. He thought that there was just a chance that he might meet Sam on the way, but he did not, and in due course arrived at school somewhat breathless after his run.

Almost the first boys he saw were Hervey and Brickwell. They looked at him suspiciously. "Where have you been ? " growled Hervey. "We know all about you going to old Barnes' place last Sunday."

Biggles hesitated. Then an idea occurred to him. " Come here," he said in a low voice. "I want to talk to you two."

They followed him without a word of protest, and from the expressions on their faces he judged they were still suffering a good deal of anxiety on account of the Foxley Wood incident. He took them to the cloakroom and shut the door.

"Have you sneaked ? " muttered Brickwell. "If you have I'll—"

"Oh, shut up ! " snapped Biggles. "Of course I haven't sneaked. But I'll tell you this. A pretty awful thing has happened, and if you don't want to be dragged in you'd better tell me the truth."

" What is it ? " burst out Brickwell, in obvious apprehension.

"Have either of you been to Foxley Wood since last Saturday ? " asked Biggles.

"No," answered Hervey, turning pale. "Honest we haven't—have we, Bricks ? " He appealed to his companion in a tone very different from the one he usually employed. It was clear that Biggles' serious expression had alarmed him.

"All right. I'll take your word for it," returned Biggles slowly.

"Why—what's happened ? " asked Hervey. "More birds have disappeared."

"How do you know ? "

"I've just been up and counted them. Five have gone since last Saturday."

"Well, it wasn't us," declared Hervey. "Was it, Bricks ? "

"Not likely," confirmed Brickwell readily. "You won't catch me going near the place in a hurry, I can tell you. My guv'nor would flay the hide off me if he knew about this," he added frankly. He looked at Hervey. "Shall we tell him ? " he whispered.

"If you like," agreed Hervey, although a trifle grudgingly.

Brickwell turned to Biggles. "We never did set any snares in Foxley Wood," he asserted.

This was something for which Biggles was not prepared. "You didn't ! " he exclaimed, for he thought he detected a ring of truth in Brickwell's voice.

"No, we didn't," growled Hervey. "The thing started last year. We went to the wood to see if the chestnuts were getting ripe. By accident, we found a pheasant in a snare, so we bagged it. It was Brick-well's idea, not mine."

"I like that ! " cried Brickwell hotly. "My idea, indeed ! Why, you said —"

"Oh, shut up ! " broke in Biggles. "What does it matter who's idea it was ? You were both in it. And you've been going there ever since, I suppose ? "

"On and off," admitted Hervey sullenly. "I told Bricks there'd be a row —"

"You're a liar ! " cried Brickwell. "It was me who said—"

"Will you stop arguing ? " rasped Biggles angrily. "Do you want the whole school to hear

? If you'd had any sense you'd have gone to Barnes and told him what was going on, then you'd have made a friend of him instead of an enemy. Do you know who was setting the snares ? "

"Yes," muttered Brickwell.

" Who ? "

"Dunnage. We saw him at it once. That was before he went to jail."

"You let him set the snares and then went round and pinched the birds," sneered Biggles.

"You're a bright pair."

"They weren't his birds," protested Hervey.

"They weren't yours, either," retorted Biggles. "But I don't want to stand here arguing with you about it. I'll take your word that you haven't been to the wood this week. There's going to be a row presently, but if you'll stay clear of the wood, and keep your mouths shut, I'll keep mine shut as far as you're concerned."

Hervey put a hand in his pocket and pulled out a bag of sweets. "Have some," he invited.

"No, thanks," answered Biggles coldly. "I don't need bribing. I haven't forgotten that you once gave me some monkey nuts," he added grimly.

"I'm sorry about that," murmured Hervey uncomfortably.

"You may be, now it can't do any good," Biggles told him as he turned away.

"Is it pax ? " asked Hervey, almost imploringly.

"Pax est—while you keep out of the wood, and stop bullying the kids," said Biggles. And with that he walked away.

XII

TRAGIC NEWS

As Biggles dressed the following morning his frame of mind was more one of pleasurable anticipation than anything else. In the first place he was relieved to know that the continuance of the poaching was not to be attributed to Hervey and Brickwell. He believed

them, because what he had seen went a long way to confirm their story. While not excusing them for what they had done he was glad that they were not quite as bad as he had at first every reason to suppose. He was glad, too, that he could now be of some service to Sam Barnes, who was, in spite of his reputation, a kindly old man who was only doing the job for which he was paid. In his own experience Sam had behaved decently, and he was looking forward to another chat with him—one which, he thought, should justify his confidence

in him. Wherefore, at Divine Service, Biggles put his heart into his singing.

The crash came immediately afterwards. A number of boys were standing about as usual, pushing, arguing, jostling, some playing conkers. Into the yard came running a boy named Thompson, who, being of a different religious denomination from the majority, had been allowed to go to his own church in the town. He was pale, and obviously in a state of excitement.

"Hi, chaps ! " he shouted shrilly. "Have you heard the news ? "

"What is it ? " asked someone casually.

"It's old Barnes."

"What about him ? " asked somebody else. "He's been shot ! "

Biggles, who heard this, felt his muscles weaken as if they had been made of jelly. He could feel the blood draining from his face. He walked forward. "What did you say ? " he asked, in a voice that he did not recognise as his own.

"Old Barnes has been shot."

"Do you mean—he's dead ? "

"Of course he's dead, you fool ! " cried Thompson, taking advantage of his brief moment of fame as a news-bearer. "Didn't I say he was shot ? "

Voices buzzed on all sides.

"Where did it happen ? " asked Biggles above the uproar, although in his heart he knew the answer.

"They found his body in Foxley Wood early this morning. Some men carried him home on a hurdle. I heard all about it in the town. Everybody's talking about it. When he didn't come home last night they went out to look for him. Grumble found him. They say the bullet went slap into his heart."

Feeling weak and ill, Biggles went to the nearest wall and leaned against it. He needed support, for the shock had produced a sensation of numbness, of unreality, such as he had never before experienced. His brain whirled, unable, it seemed, to grasp the dreadful truth. Sam

Barnes was dead. The poor old man had been murdered, shot down in full health by a poacher's bullet. He would never see him again. It seemed impossible.

Biggles closed his eyes, tears that he could not restrain oozing through the closed lids.

"Look at Biggles ! " cried a boy, laughing. "He's blubbing."

Biggles sprang at him like a tiger, but the boy bolted, so he went back to the wall, fighting to recover his composure, for he wanted to think.

This was not easy, but when he had recovered somewhat his first reaction was alarm. He was alarmed by the knowledge of what he knew. That he knew who the murderer was he never for a moment doubted. In his mind's eye he could still see the picture of Dunnage's brutal face in the moonlight ; could still see him beating the brains out of the luckless pheasant, could see him folding the gun, and his stealthy departure. Slowly Biggles' grief turned to anger. Not for an instant had he any doubts as to what he should do.

As soon as dinner was over, without speaking to anybody, he went out through the school gates and walked straight to the Police Station.

There he found Marshall, the police sergeant, Grumble, the local constable, and an inspector whom he did not know. They broke off talking when he walked in and looked at him inquiringly.

" Yes, sonny, what is it ? " asked the sergeant. "We're busy."

"I know you must be," answered Biggles.

But

I've come to tell you who shot Sam Barnes." "Yes, and who was it ? " asked the sergeant, smiling condescendingly. "Make haste."

"It was Mick Dunnage," stated Biggles.

"That's what we all thought at first, but I'm afraid you've guessed wrong, laddie," said the inspector, and turned away.

"But I'm not guessing," replied Biggles. "I know Dunnage did it."

"Oh, and how do you know ? "

" I was there," asserted Biggles.

"You mean—you saw Dunnage shoot Barnes ? " " Well, no, I didn't exactly see him shoot him, but—"

"Now you run along and play, there's a good boy," said the sergeant patronisingly.

"But I tell you I was in Foxley Wood yesterday

and I saw Dunnage there ! " cried Biggles in an exasperated voice, for this was a very different reception from what he had expected.

"What time was this ? " asked the inspector.

"I hadn't a watch, but it must have been about five."

The inspector shook his head. "It wasn't Dunnage you saw. Dunnage was in Hayford from three o'clock until after midnight. He's got a stone cold alibi—if you know what that means ? "

"Who says he was in Hayford ? "

"Fred Chapman, who keeps the Horse and Hounds public-house. Jeremiah Siggins was there, too. They were all drinking together—got drunk together, from what I can make out. Afterwards Siggins drove Dunnage home in his dogcart."

Somebody's telling lies ! " declared Biggles hotly. "Dunnage hasn't got a rifle, or a gun, if it comes to that. He's no licence."

Biggles laughed scornfully. "That wouldn't stop him from carrying one. In fact, he was carrying one last night, because I saw him."

The sergeant shook his head. "I'm sorry, sonny, your story won't wash. What we want is facts."

Biggles nearly choked. "If you'll come with me I'll show you Dunnage's tracks," he offered.

" In the wood ? "

"Of course not. How could there be tracks on dead leaves ? I mean on the path to Hayford."

"I said he was in Hayford," answered the sergeant. "He walked there, by the footpath."

Now you trot along and play, like a good boy."

Biggles saw that he was wasting his time. Swallowing his anger, he said: "Will you please tell me this. Have you got the bullet that killed Mr.

Barnes ? "

"Yes, we have."

"What calibre was it ? "

"What's that to you ? "

"I have a reason for wanting to know."

"It was a .44. Now stop asking questions before I get angry."

"I'm sorry I troubled you," said Biggles simply. "One day you'll be sorry you didn't listen to me." He went out into the street.

He walked along to the next corner and then stopped, brooding. "Trot along, sonny," the policeman had said, as if he were a fool. For a little while he lingered, wondering if he should go to the Squire and tell him the story. Perhaps he would be reasonable enough to listen to it.

As he stood there he saw the two very men uppermost in his mind, Dunnage and Siggins, come out of the White Hart tavern. They made a nice pair, he thought bitterly.

Siggins, he knew, was lying, to provide Dunnage with an alibi. That could only mean they were partners in crime. Remembering how he had seen Hervey and Brickwell dispose of a pheasant to Siggins, the thought struck him that Dunnage probably sold his poached pheasants to the same man.

The two men had now parted company, Dunnage walking on towards the house where he lived, and Siggins cutting across the street towards his shop, or the lane that gave access to his back door. Watching the man, Biggles had what he thought was an inspiration.

Dunnage had killed a pheasant the previous evening, when he had, Biggles did not doubt, been caught in the act by Barnes. Dunnage had shot Barnes and then gone on to Hayford. Siggins had driven him home. The chances were, therefore, that the pheasant was now in Siggins's house. Dunnage would not like the idea of throwing it away,

and knowing that he might expect a visit from the police would hardly be likely to take it home. The simplest way of disposing of it would be to give it, or sell it, to Siggins, who would be under no suspicion.

Siggins was just opening his back door when Biggles ran after him.
"Just a minute, Mr.

Siggins ; can I have a word with you ? " he requested.

The man half turned. "What is it ? " he asked gruffly.

Biggles glanced furtively up and down the lane for effect. "Have you by any chance got a pheasant you could sell me ? " he whispered.

"What makes you think I sell pheasants ? " asked Siggins suspiciously.

"One of the boys at school—Hervey—gave me the tip that you sometimes have one or two."

"Then he must be a young fool to talk about it," growled Siggins angrily. "He knows I haven't got a game licence. What do you want a pheasant for, anyhow ? "

"I want to send one to a friend, as a present," dissembled Biggles.

The man hesitated, which told Biggles that whether he got one or not there was one in the house. "Can you keep your mouth shut if I let you have one ? " inquired Siggins.

"Of course. Do you think I want to be locked up ? " answered Biggles.

"It'll cost you half a crown."

"That's about what I thought," agreed Biggles, who had such a coin in his pocket—the same one, as a matter of detail, that he had won at the fair. He had been keeping it for luck.

"Wait a minute."

The man went in and was away a little while. He came back with a brown-paper parcel which he thrust into Biggles' hands as if he were glad to be rid of it.

Biggles passed over the half-crown.

Siggins went in and shut the door.

Biggles went back to the street, with difficulty steadying his pace to a casual walk. Such was his impatience that he wanted to run. He made straight back for school.

He could not wait until he got there to see what every fibre of his body was aching to see.

Had he the bird, or had he wasted his half-crown on one of the snared ones ? Choosing a quiet spot in the churchyard, behind some yews, with fingers that trembled from impatience, he tore the string off the parcel, and unfolding the paper looked at the contents.

It was a pheasant. He looked at its head, and a glance told him all he wanted to know.

The bird's head was a mass of congealed blood. Swiftly he rewrapped the parcel and went on to the school.

There he met Smith, who looked at him curiously. "What's the matter with you ? "asked Smith. "You look as if you'd seen a ghost," he added.

"Come upstairs to the dorm.," whispered Biggles. "What's in the parcel ? "

"Come on and I'll tell you," replied Biggles. He felt that he had to tell somebody or burst.

In the dormitory, which was deserted, Biggles went to his bed, pulled his cricket bag from under it, stuffed the parcel in and pushed it back.

"What is all this fag about ? " asked Smith wonderingly.

"Sit down and I'll tell you," replied Biggles. "I'm pretty sure I know who killed poor old Barnes."

Smith's eyebrows went up. "Then if I were you I'd keep my mouth shut, for fear I got shot myself," he said in a scared voice.

"And let the murderer go free ? Not likely ! " "What's in the parcel—a piece of the body or something ? "

"No, a pheasant."

" What's that got to do with it ? "

"Listen, and I'll tell you," replied Biggles eagerly. "Barnes was out after poachers when he was shot."

" Well ? "

"He was killed by a bullet from a .44 rifle. I know who's got a rifle about that size. This pheasant I've got was poached. If it was shot we ought to find a bullet in it. If it's a .44

bullet I shall know for certain that the man who shot the bird also shot Barnes. The police can then compare the bullets. All we have to do then is find the rifle, and the owner of it.

"

"Did you work all that out yourself ? " inquired Smith, admiringly.

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"Jolly good. Have you got the bullet ? "Not yet."

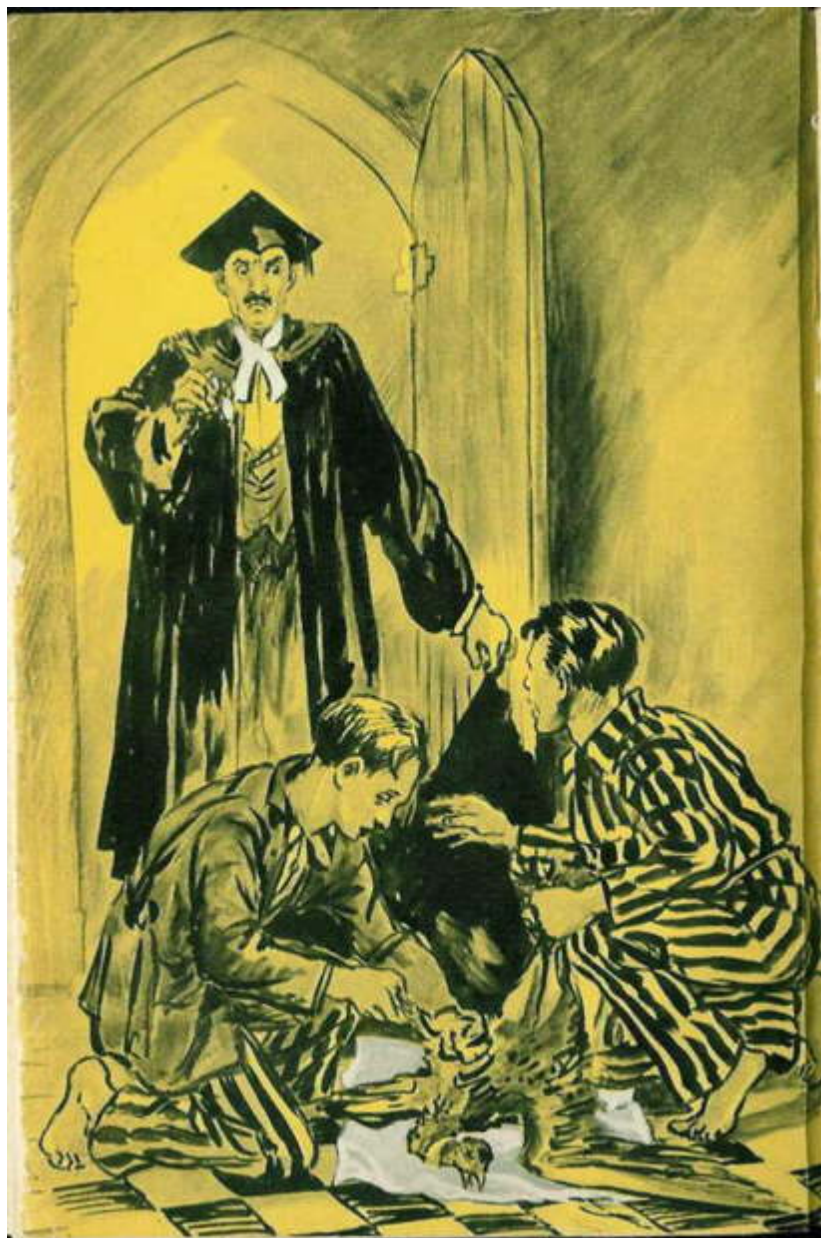
"Then let's have a look."

"Not now. The feathers would get all over the place, and somebody might come in. We'll cut it up in the lay, when everyone is asleep—say, when the clock strikes midnight."

"That's a good idea," congratulated Smith, entering into the spirit of the thing. " I'll help you. I remember reading a story once called The Ghastly Ghost of Golden Gulch where the murderer—"

"Cave I Here comes Page. Not a word. Midnight, remember. If you're asleep, I'll wake you. If I'm asleep, you wake me."

Biggles was in little danger of sleeping. His brain was racing, and he could hardly wait



for the hour to strike. When at long last it struck twelve he crept out of bed, put a jacket over his pyjamas, drew out the cricket bag, and going to Smith's bed, found him asleep.

He shook him awake, and on tip-toe they made their way to the place appointed for the operation. This had been selected by Biggles chiefly on account of the oilcloth on the floor, which could, he thought, be cleaned easily afterwards.

Spreading the paper on the floor Biggles laid the bird in the middle of it and took out his penknife. Smith also knelt down and held the pheasant by the legs to prevent it from moving.

"Watch the feathers," said Biggles, as he began pulling them out. He put them down carefully, and Smith kept them on the paper.

Biggles' first discovery was the hole in the bird's breast where the bullet had entered.

This was soon found because the feathers at that spot were damp and matted. Quickly he turned the bird over and searched its back, afraid that the bullet might have gone right through, which would of course have defeated his object. There was no second hole, so he started to dig with his knife, finding the business a good deal more difficult than he expected. However, he continued to dig and probe with the point of the blade, and after a little while had the satisfaction of striking something solid. Tearing the hole wider with his fingers, he inserted a finger and thumb and extracted the bullet.

"That's it," he declared, trembling with excitement. "That's about a .44."

At that moment a voice behind them said : "What are you boys doing ? "

After the first horrible start of surprise Biggles shifted his body to conceal the corpse, and looking round saw the Head standing in the doorway.

"I happened to be checking some examination papers, and seeing this light on—I can see it from my study—came up thinking that perhaps a boy was sick," explained the Head. "

What are you fellows doing on the floor ? What is it you are trying to hide ? " He stepped aside so that he could see, and, of course, he saw. "Do I see a pheasant ? " he asked in a curious voice, somewhat unnecessarily.

"Yes, sir," answered Biggles miserably.

" Bigglesworth 1 " There was an inflection in the Head's voice that sent cold shivers down Biggles' back.

Biggles did not answer. He tried to muster the strength to stand up, but failed.

"I thought you told me that you never poached game ? " said the Head, in the same strange voice.

"I told you the truth, sir," croaked Biggles. "I didn't poach this bird. I bought it."

"You bought it ? "

" Yes, sir."

"Do you expect me to believe that ? "

" No, sir."

"What, may I ask, are you doing with it ? " " I'm dissecting it, sir."

"For what purpose ? "

"I was looking for the bullet that killed it." "Why choose this hour ? "

"Because I couldn't wait any longer," answered Biggles truthfully.

"Was there so much hurry ? "

"Yes, sir," answered Biggles. "You see, sir, I'm trying to prove that Dunnage the poacher shot Mr. Barnes."

The Head stared for so long that Biggles hung his head. At last he said : "Have you reason to suppose that Dunnage killed Mr. Barnes." ?

"I'm sure he did," said Biggles desperately. "What makes you think that ? "

"I was there at the time, sir."

"Why didn't you tell the police ? "

"I did, sir, but they wouldn't believe me. They laughed at me," said Biggles, with a catch in his voice.

"Pick up that horrible mess—don't spill the feathers all over the place—and come to my room," ordered the Head.

" Yes, sir."

In the study the mutilated carcass of the bird was put on the floor near the desk. The Head sat down. The boys remained standing beside their

gruesome trophy.

"Now, Bigglesworth," said the Head quietly, "let's have the truth of this. I imagine it has something to do with the poaching that has been going on ? "

"Yes, sir. Apart from snaring, a man was shooting the pheasants. That man, I'm sure, shot Mr. Barnes. The bullet they took out of Mr. Barnes was a .44. calibre rifle bullet. The police told me that. The bullet I have just taken out of this pheasant is about a '44. Here it is, sir." Biggles stepped forward and dropped it, a small but significant object, on the desk.

The Head picked it up, peeled off a small feather that was sticking to it and looked at it closely. " Yes," he said, "I should say that's a .44. You say you bought this bird, Bigglesworth ? "

" Yes, sir."

" Where ? "

"At Siggins, the butcher, sir."

"But Siggins hasn't a licence to buy or sell game." "I know that, sir. But I happened to know that he did."

" Indeed ? Be very careful what you say, boy. What led you to think that Siggins bought poached pheasants ? "

Biggles moistened his lips. " I discovered by accident that the boys who ran away in Foxley Wood, when there was all that trouble, sold their pheasants to Siggins. I saw them."

The Head drew a deep breath and putting his fingers together leaned back in his chair. "I think, Bigglesworth, you had better tell me all you know about this business," he said gravely. "This is no ordinary matter. It is my considered opinion that the question of sneaking does not arise."

"Very well, sir," said Biggles in a dull voice. "On the Saturday afternoon when I was nearly caught I saw two boys in the wood. I admitted that. They had a sack with something in it. On my way home I overtook them, but they didn't see me. They turned into Siggins' lane. As I passed I saw Siggins at the door and heard money jingle. When the boys went on they no longer had the sack. I thought it better not to say anything about that at the time. The next afternoon I

went as Sir Colin told me and apologised to Mr. Barnes. He was very nice about it and we discussed the birds. He asked me to keep an eye on Foxley Wood and tell him if I saw anything suspicious. I wasn't thinking of a real poacher. I was thinking of the boys. I told them that if they ever went into the wood again I should report them to you. I'm pretty sure they haven't been. They've told me since that they didn't set the snares, but only took pheasants out of them. Yesterday afternoon I went to Foxley Wood to count the birds, just to make sure there had been no more poaching. Five had gone. I was standing there when I heard a rifle shot in the wood. I heard a pheasant drop out of a tree. A little while afterwards there was another shot. This time no bird fell—or if it did, I didn't hear it. I kept still. Soon afterwards, out of the wood, breathing hard, came Dunnage. I saw him distinctly in the moonlight. In his hand he had a folding gun, and a pheasant. That's the pheasant, sir, on the floor."

"How do you know that ? "

"Because the bird that Dunnage held was not quite dead, and he beat its head brutally on a post to kill it." Biggles pointed to the floor. "As you can see, sir, the head of that bird has been beaten to pulp. Also, it had the bullet in it. Dunnage only shot one. I'm sure that'

s it. There were only two shots. I believe now that it was the second shot that killed Mr.

Barnes."

"Go on."

"Well, sir, it struck me that if Siggins bought pheasants from the boys, as I knew he did, it was pretty certain that he would buy those Dunnage killed. The two men were friendly.

To-day I saw Dunnage and Siggins together. I followed Siggins to his house and bought a pheasant from him. That's the one on the floor, sir."

"Did you tell the police this ? "

"Not the last part, sir. When I told them I'd seen Dunnage in the wood they told me it was impossible, because Dunnage could prove that he had spent the afternoon and evening with Siggins in the public-house at Hayford. It was after I had seen the police that I bought the pheasant."

"I see. And what did you intend to do next ? " " Find the rifle, sir."

"Oh, do you think you could ? "

" Yes, sir."

"The police haven't found a weapon, I take it ? " "No, sir. They say Dunnage hasn't got a rifle or a gun."

"Where do you think this rifle is ? "

"Well, sir, Dunnage wouldn't be likely to take the rifle home after what he'd done. He'd want to be rid of it. He might have left it in the public-house at Hayford, or he might have given it to Siggins to take care of ; but I think it's more likely that he would hide it before he got to Hayford, just in case anyone saw him with it. I saw which way he went. It was my intention to track him—I know his footprints—and find out where he put the rifle. I told you I'd had some experience of tracking. What worries me, though, is that it might rain before next Wednesday afternoon. Rain would blot out Dunnage's footprints. Or by that time he might have moved the rifle to another place."

The Head was silent for a long time. At last he said : "I dislike very much the idea of you boys being mixed up in this nasty business ; but a wicked crime has been committed, and it is our duty to do everything in our power to bring the murderer to justice. Would you like to be excused school in the morning ? "

Biggles' lips parted. "That would be wonderful, sir. May Smith come with me ? It might be a good thing to have a witness."

The Head smiled wanly. "If Smith tertius wishes to go, he may."

"Thank you, sir."

The Head rose. " Npw you had better be getting back to your beds." He pointed to the pheasant. "You can leave that beastly mess here. Not a word of this to anyone. Good night."

"Good night, sir."

The boys left the room. "I always knew the Head was a jolly good sport," declared Smith, as they hastened along the corridor.

"Of course," answered Biggles. He was beginning to feel that everything was turning out for the best.

ON THE TRAIL

To Biggles' great satisfaction no more rain fell that night, and it was in almost high spirits that, as soon as he had finished breakfast, he set out with Smith for Foxley Wood.

His optimism was not shared by Smith, who expressed doubts as to the outcome of the quest, with, moreover, a certain degree of morbid apprehension. He made no secret of his fear of Dunnage. On the other hand, Biggles hated the man whom he was convinced had killed the old gamekeeper. He was determined at any cost to see that justice was done.

As he averred, Mr. Barnes could not be brought back to life, but he could be avenged.

The wood was reached without incident, and Biggles went straight on to the place in the fence where he had seen the poacher leave it. In the bright morning light the whole atmosphere was different, and he was soon showing Smith the artfully-contrived gap. He also pointed out the post on which Dunnage had beaten the luckless pheasant to death. A gruesome stain on it, to which still adhered some small feathers, confirmed his story.

"Don't touch anything," he warned. "That poet may be evidence. It will at least prove that I didn't make up the tale."

They got through the gap, replacing the staves behind them, and there on the yielding ground were

the footprints, so plain that there was no difficulty in following them. There were no others, except an occasional mark made unmistakably by a rabbit. "Walk on the grass,"

Biggles told his friend. "We may have to show the police these footprints. Come on."

They went on, walking briskly and without a check to the first obstacle, which was a stile through a hedge. The track continued on beyond it, but Biggles spent a minute examining the ground closely to make sure that Dunnage had not left the track on either side with the object of hiding the rifle in the hedge. On again to another hedge, with another stile, and beyond that a path that ran diagonally across a stubble to a grass field on the far side.

The path was still plain, and although the footprints were sometimes lost, as if Dunnage had strayed in the dark, they were always found a little farther on. There were some horses in the grass field, and they had in places crossed the track, leaving here and there a hoof mark superimposed on the nailed boot ; but there was no real check in the trail.

"Dunnage can't have much of a brain or he would have had more sense than to leave a track like this," observed Biggles as they walked along. "He should have kept off the bare ground."

"It was dark, don't forget," reminded Smith. "Perhaps he was afraid that if he got off the path he wouldn't find it again. Perhaps he didn't know he was leaving a track. No doubt he was in a hurry, too ; and, after all, he didn't know you'd seen him leave the wood."

"I'm jolly glad he didn't," returned Biggles with feeling. "If he had he'd have put a bullet into me by now."

"It all goes to show you never know who's about," remarked Smith heavily.

Now came another stubble field, on the far side of which a gate provided a way through a tangle of briars. Both boys spent some time in the bushes, stamping about and getting well scratched to no purpose, for the rifle did not come to light. Beyond the gate a big grass field sloped down at a gentle incline towards a group of elms, above which, in the distance, rose the smoke from the chimneys of Hayford village. There were some cows grazing in this field, a few scattered about, but most of them in the far corner, near the path, where presently appeared a pond. The path skirted the pond to reach another stile, after which it went on down rather sharply to a lane which Biggles imagined led to the village.

Reaching the pond, Biggles stopped and looked at it thoughtfully. "If I wanted to get rid of something in a hurry, that's the place I should choose to put it," he remarked.

"The track goes right on," Smith pointed out.

"I know it does, but Dunnage could have thrown the rifle into the water without leaving the track. No one would be likely to find it in the pond by accident. Let's have a look."

Keeping on the grass he followed the track, studying each footprint in turn. "Here you are," he said sharply, "He did something here. Look.

That footmark has a twist in it. See how the nail marks slide sideways."

"He might have slipped," suggested Smith.

"He might," agreed Biggles, "but why should he ? He hasn't slipped anywhere else.

Personally, with those nails in his boots I don't think he would slip. I'm not going past this pond without searching it. After all, Dunnage must have known he was getting near Hayford, and unless he intended giving the rifle to the publican or Siggins to take care of, he'd soon have to get rid of it. Personally, I don't think he'd care to go into the pub with the rifle on him."

"Would he know Siggins was there ? " queried Smith.

"My guess is that Siggins used to come to the village with his dogcart to wait for him.

That's where they met after Dunnage had been poaching. That would save Dunnage walking home with the pheasants on him. If I'm right, it would account for why poor old Barnes never caught Dunnage on the Hertbury road. He told me he'd spent a lot of time on it, waiting for him."

"How are you going to search the pond ? " asked Smith dubiously.

"By paddling, of course. It doesn't look deep. If the rifle is there I shall feel it with my feet. Dunnage wouldn't be such a fool as to throw the rifle in deep water, where he couldn't get it again."

"You'll get in an awful mess. The bottom looks all mud."

"I can't help that," answered Biggles firmly, and sitting down began to pull off his shoes and socks. This done, he rolled up his trousers to above the knees and stepped gingerly into the water. He grimaced as his feet were submerged. "Phew I It's beastly cold," he muttered.

The first thing he found was an old iron hoop. He threw it aside and carried on, working each portion of the pool systematically. He found two or three old cans, a broken lantern,



a bent bucket and a china doll, all of which he discarded. Then he winced as his toe struck another object. Stooping, he groped in the mud, found the thing and held it up. It was a rifle with a skeleton stock, still folded. "That's it," he said in a voice brittle with excitement. Dropping the weapon, he splashed quickly to the bank.

"Aren't you going to keep the rifle ? " exclaimed Smith in surprise.

"Keep it ? Not likely."

" Why not ? "

"What would be the use of that ? Dunnage would disown it. As he isn't supposed to have a gun of any sort he'd swear it wasn't his. Then who could prove that it was ? No, the police will have to catch him with it on him."

"How are they going to do that ? "

' By watching him. He won't leave the rifle there for ever. It's worth money. Besides, he'

ll want it again, no doubt."

Biggles said this sitting on the grass, wiping his feet with his handkerchief, which was soon a nasty, wet-looking mess. "Lend me yours, Smith, to finish off with," he requested.

Smith obediently handed over a dirty piece of rag. "Don't get mud on it," he warned. "It's the only one I have."

Biggles rubbed his feet, pulled on his socks, and got into his shoes. He had just laced them when a slight sound made him look up. A man was getting over the stile, less than a score of yards away. Biggles stiffened with shock when he recognised him. It was Dunnage. He managed to hiss " Cave ! " and then pretended to be looking for something in the grass.

A choking, "Oh, my gosh ! " informed him that Smith had grasped the situation.

Dunnage walked slowly forward. "What are you doin' here, you young devils ? "he growled.

"We're just out for a walk," replied Biggles evenly.

"Why ain't you at school, eh ? "

"Because we've got a holiday," announced Biggles. Dunnage scowled. "Well, clear out—

the pair of yer—before I puts my foot be'ind yer."

"Yes, Mr. Dunnage," said Biggles meekly, for he suspected from the man's flushed face that he had been drinking, and he had no desire to

argue with a drunken man. With Smith beside him looking thoroughly scared, he began to walk away in the direction from which they had come.

Actually his brain was racing. That Dunnage might return so soon was something he hadn't reckoned on, and for a moment he was afraid that his scheme had come to nothing. Glancing over his shoulder he saw Dunnage still standing by the pond, watching them out of sight.

"Do you think he's come to fetch the rifle ? " asked Smith, seeming to speak with difficulty.

"I can't think of any other reason why he should be there," answered Biggles. " Keep going. Don't look round. Wait till we get to the gate."

By the time they had reached the gate with the

briars on either side of it, Dunnage had turned away and was staring at the pond. Biggles crouched behind the briars, pulling the twigs apart for a better view of the field they had just left.

"He'll see the mud has been stirred up," said Smith nervously.

"He'll think it's the cattle," returned Biggles. "By gum ! I'm jolly glad he didn't come a minute or two earlier and catch me in the water."

"Suppose he'd seen you with the rifle in your hand ? " suggested Smith. He swayed at the thought.

Biggles was still watching Dunnage. "There he goes ! " he exclaimed. "He's in the pond.

Didn't bother to take his boots off."

"What are we going to do ? "

"Wait to see if he gets the rifle. Then we'll watch which way he goes."

There was no more talking for a minute. Stiff with interest the boys watched Dunnage groping about in the mud. They saw him stoop and lift the rifle out of the water. He washed it quickly and after a swift glance around put it into his trousers. He came out of the water, stood for a minute looking up and down, and then walked quickly away, taking the path that the boys had taken.

"He's coming this way ! " Smith's voice cracked with alarm.

"You're right," agreed Biggles, in an agitated whisper. "Let's push on to the next hedge.

Keep low. We don't want him to see us."

Bent nearly double, the boys sprinted to the next stile, scrambled over it, and, again getting behind the hedge, looked back.

"He's still coming," panted Smith. " Let's go. I don't like this. He'll wring our necks if he spots we're watching him."

Again the boys ran to the next hedge. Again they halted to look back. Dunnage was still coming on. Biggles spoke tersely. " I'll tell you what. If the police can grab him with that rifle on him, he's as good as on the gallows. I'll stay and watch where he goes. You run for all you're worth to the Head and tell him what's happened."

"Why not go to the police—it's nearer ? "

"No use. They won't believe you. They'll believe the Head. It wouldn't surprise me if he's already told the police what I told him last night. Go on. Don't stop for anything."

"You watch out," gasped Smith.

"Don't worry about me. I can race him if he comes for me."

"He may shoot you."

"He'll have to clean the rifle before he can use it. It must be full of mud. Go on. Don't argue."

Smith needed no further pressing. Bending low, elbows in his ribs, he went across the field as if a bull was on his heels.

Biggles watched for Dunnage to come into sight, when he, too, beat a retreat. And so it went on, Dunnage advancing and Biggles retreating, but keeping the man in sight, until Foxley Wood was reached. There Biggles was in some doubt as to what he should do for the best, because it was apparent that if Dunnage went into the wood he would lose sight of him altogether. No matter where he stood, the man might leave the wood on the opposite side, although the chances were, he thought, that Dunnage would carry on to the Hertbury road.

Biggles had no intention of being caught in the wood by a ruffian whom he was sure had just committed one murder in it ; so he went

on to the far side, and after waiting for a minute or two continued on to the Hertbury road. Reaching it, he again took up a position from where he could watch without being seen.

When Dunnage had not appeared in a quarter of an hour it became evident that he had either stopped by the wood or gone into it. Biggles could think of many things that he might be doing. He might be lying low, waiting for darkness to return home. He might be hiding the rifle in another place, although it seemed improbable that he would choose a spot so near the scene of his crime. He might have stopped to clean the rifle, or to remove traces of his previous visit to the place—the footprints by the fence, for instance.

More time passed and Biggles became really worried. Smith, by now, should have reached the school. The thought was no consolation to Biggles, who realised that if the police now appeared, while Dunnage was out of sight, the man might see them before they saw him, in which case he would either go into hiding or conceal the weapon which would be required to prove his guilt.

Biggles was greatly relieved, therefore, when Dunnage now came into sight, striding towards the road as if he hadn't a care in the world. As Biggles realised, he no longer had the gamekeeper to fear.

Keeping well below the hedge to avoid being seen,

Biggles began to move slowly towards Hertbury ; but he had not gone far when who should he see coming towards him, with a purposeful stride, but Grumble, otherwise P.C.

Grimble. In the far distance, a cautious spectator, appeared Smith.

Biggles guessed what had happened. Smith had obviously not been all the way to school and back. He must have met Grumble and told him his story. He would naturally do that if he met the policeman, reasoned Biggles. But he felt that it would not do for Dunnage to see the policeman first, so he tore down the road in the hope of reaching Grumble before Dunnage got over the gate. In this he succeeded. " Hide ! Hide ! " he called. "He's coming ! "

"What 'ave I got to 'ide for ? " demanded the constable belligerently.

"Because if he sees you he'll either bolt or shoot you," panted Biggles. "The rifle's in his trousers. Hide, and jump out on him when he's close. That's the best way."

Apparently the constable thought there was something in this argument. Anyhow, he followed Biggles' advice by getting clumsily into the ditch. Biggles strolled on a little way pretending to pick blackberries, but in reality looking sideways along the road. To his great satisfaction he saw Dunnage climb over the gate and saunter unsuspiciously towards the trap. Biggles could hardly breathe for excitement. He could see Smith standing, a lonely figure, in the middle of the road a long way away. He waved to him to come nearer. Smith waved back but remained where he was.

Biggles was about thirty yards away when Dunnage drew level with the policeman.

Grimble then rose like a pillar of authority, and advancing, said loudly: "I want a word with you, Dunnage."

The poacher's eyes narrowed under their shaggy brows. "Wot do yer want ? " he grated.

"Can't a man walk down the public road without bein' interfered with by a lousy copper ?

"

"I want to have a look at what you've got in your pockets," said P.C. Grimble, with all the confidence in the world, but, thought Biggles, rather foolishly.

"Oh, yer do, do yer ? " rasped Dunnage.

"Yes, I do," said the constable.

Dunnage, apparently, had no intention of being searched, for with an oath he turned to run. But the policeman was ready for such a move ; he jumped forward, grabbed him, and spun him round so that they were face to face. Dunnage struck out viciously.

Grimble struck back. Then the two men closed and stood straining and swaying on their feet, the poacher cursing, Grimble silent. Biggles ran in close, crying : "Where's your whistle, Mr. Grimble ?—give me your whistle ! "

No doubt the policeman would have done so had he been able to ; but both his hands were occupied and the request met with no response.

The end came suddenly, and it came in a manner that sent Biggles

staggering back with a cry of dismay. Dunnage tore himself free by sheer brute strength. He leapt back. Then, in a flash, he whipped out the still-folded rifle, swung it, and brought it crashing across the policeman's head. Grimble's legs crumpled

under him and he collapsed on the road. His helmet rolled off. He tried to get up, but fell again.

Biggles, paralysed by shock and fear, could only stand and stare.

"I'll get you for this, you little swine ! " Dunnage roared at him, his face convulsed with fury.

Biggles turned and ran for his life.

When he had gone a little way, not hearing footsteps behind him, he snatched a glance over his shoulder and saw Dunnage running the other way. He watched him climb a gate and run on towards Foxley Wood. Upon this Biggles dashed back to the policeman, who was trying, not very successfully, to get on his feet. Biggles helped him up. For some seconds Grimble could only stand swaying with a hand to his face, down which blood was running. "Where is he ? " he kept saying in a dazed voice.

"He's bolted into Foxley Wood," Biggles told him. He picked up the helmet and returned it to its owner.

"Chance of a lifetime and I go and make a mess of it," groaned Grimble, although exactly what he meant by that Biggles didn't know. " Foxley Wood, did you say ? " asked the policeman.

"Yes, Mr. Grimble."

" Then I'm goin' after him," declared the constable, drawing his truncheon. "You be a good boy and run to the town and tell the Inspector what's happened."

"Yes, Mr. Grimble. Mind you don't get shot." With this parting admonition Biggles sprinted down the road towards Smith, who was now coming slowly to meet him.

"Did you see that ? " asked Biggles as they met. "Of course I saw it—d'you think I'm blind ? "cried

Smith, who seemed near to hysteria. His face was as pale as death.

"We've got to go to the town to fetch help," said Biggles.

"Then let's go," agreed Smith. "I've had enough of trying to catch murderers."

They started running down the road.

"Did you see the Head ? " asked Biggles.

"No, I met Grimble and told him," answered Smith as they ran on.
"What did Dunnage shout at you ? " "He said he'd do me in," replied Biggles.

"Did he say that ? " gasped Smith.

"Something like it."

Smith clapped a hand to his head with a deep groan. "Then we're done for."

" Funk ! " sneered Biggles.

Smith gulped. "I don't care. I'm going back to school," he declared, breaking into a sprint.

Biggles kept on at a steady pace. He, too, was anxious to get back to school and safety, but he went to the police station first. He burst in like a whirlwind, to find the sergeant sitting at his desk talking to the Inspector and a man in plain clothes.

Biggles wasted no time in preamble. Words poured from him in an unbroken spate. "

Quick ! " he cried. "Dunnage has nearly killed Grimble—bashed his head in with a gun ; but Grimble is still after Dunnage. Dunnage has got the rifle that killed Barnes. He's gone into Foxley Wood. Mr. Grimble sent me to tell you he wants help."

On this occasion there was no suggestion of hesitation on the part of the police. The sergeant's stool went over with a crash as he sprang to his feet. They all grabbed their hats. " Foxley Wood, did you say ? " was the only question the sergeant asked.

"Yes," replied Biggles. He followed them out and watched them running up the road.

Then he made his way back to school.

Even then he had not grasped the full purport of what had happened, possibly because it did not occur to him that Dunnage might escape. He felt sure that the police would catch him. It was only when he learned, the following day, that Dunnage had got clear away, that he became aware of a sinking feeling in the stomach. The poacher's last words were still ringing in his ears, and Biggles did not doubt that, given the opportunity, Dunnage would carry out his threat.

XIV

RETRIBUTION

ON reaching the school Biggles went straight to the Head's study and found Smith already there, having told the story of what had happened as a result of their investigations.

It transpired that Smith had found the Head waiting at the gate, so anxious was he to know the outcome of their search. In view of Biggles' story overnight he had been in touch with the police, with the result that, as Biggles had suspected, P.C. Grimble had been sent along in the direction of Foxley Wood to watch out for the boys and make sure that they came to no harm.

Biggles now gave the Head his own version of the affair, with the result that, to his dismay, an order was sent out recalling all boys to the school and, moreover, confining them to the school precincts until further notice.

For this imposition Biggles and Smith were held by the school to be responsible, and for a little while their lives were made a burden to them. Then, some how or other, the truth leaked out, and then, of course, they were bombarded with questions, most of which they were able to answer because by this time it was known that a warrant was out for the poacher's arrest. It was the one topic of conversation in the town. Biggles, on his part, had no desire to go out, for he saw clearly the extent of his danger. In his mind's eye he could still see the expression of rage and hate on Dunnage's face as he ran away, and, knowing what the result of an encounter would be, took no risks. His most ardent prayer was that the police would soon catch the man and relieve him of this awful suspense.

The police came to the school several times ; not only Grimble (with his head bandaged) and the sergeant, but a detective in plain clothes who, according to rumour, had come from London to prosecute the search for the murderer. Biggles was asked many questions, always in

the Head's study, so that at the finish the police had a complete record of his part in the affair. The rest of the school knew this, and for a little while Biggles moved in a halo of hero-worship, which, however, did nothing to ease his anxiety. In his vivid imagination, Dunnage was always round the next corner, waiting for him. The fact that a police

cordon had been thrown round the county brought small comfort.

Days passed. The end of the term, and the Christmas holidays were now in sight.

Rumours flew. All roads and stations were being watched. Dunnage had been seen here, there, and everywhere. But the report that Biggles wanted more than anything to hear, that the man had been caught, did not come. Siggins had been arrested, on a charge of buying and selling game without a licence, but really, as everyone knew, on suspicion of being an accessory after the murder. Later, to Biggles great regret, he was released on bail.

At the end of another week it was stated that the police were satisfied that Dunnage had left the district ; and on the following day the Head lifted the ban on the school, with the reservation that boys should keep together, stay on the road, and not go far away. He advised Biggles privately that he would be wise not to leave the school just yet, an injunction which Biggles obeyed without protest. If the truth must be told, he was sick of the whole miserable business.

But when another week had elapsed without any sign of Dunnage in the vicinity, precautions were gradually relaxed and the school drifted back to its old way of life.

Boys went farther and farther afield without mishap, and Biggles, usually with Smith, from walking a few hundred yards only, slowly extended the range of his excursions.

Still, they did not leave the road, and behaved generally like Indian scouts on the warpath. There was no affectation about this. Biggles was really worried. He could not forget the expression on Dunnage's face when he uttered his last threat. That the man meant what he said, Biggles did not for a moment doubt.

The behaviour of Hervey and Brickwell, apparently in their relief of being kept out of the trouble, swung right round. There was no longer any scowling, much less bullying.

Indeed, they made overtures of friendliness on every possible

occasion, offering sweets and the like. Biggles accepted the olive branch, and not only spoke to them, but sometimes walked with them, discussing the situation, which was still the topic on all lips. He told them now the whole story of that fateful afternoon when he had seen them in Foxley Wood, and also, to their consternation, what he had seen at Siggins' back door.

However, he hastened to reassure them that, as far as he was concerned, the matter was dead and buried. Some good had come of it, anyway, as without that knowledge he would not have bought the pheasant which was now the most important piece of evidence against Dunnage. The unpleasant secret which they alone shared seemed to form a tacit understanding between them.

One day—it was a half-holiday--Hervey happened to ask : "Where did you and Smith used to hide when me and Bricks chased you ? We could never make out where you went. You just seemed to disappear."

Biggles smiled. "We hid in a cave," he answered. "A cave ? "

" Yes."

"Do you mean you know of a cave near here ? " "Yes. I discovered it by accident,"

answered Biggles casually.

" What sort of a cave is it ? "

"Oh, it's just a hole in a cliff. It doesn't go in very far. I think it must have been made by men digging limestone years ago."

"A cave, eh ? " put in Brickwell. "Where is it ? " Biggles hesitated.

"Come on , " urged Hervey. "Be a sport and tell us. After all, you won't need it any more.

We don't chase you any longer."

"I think I ought to ask Smith first," returned Biggles. "He's part owner of it." He called to Smith, who was playing conkers not far away.

"They want me to show them the cave,"

he explained.

"Well, why don't you ? "answered Smith. "I don't care. It's a messy

hole, anyway."

"All right," agreed Biggles.

"Can I come ? "asked Smith.

" Of course."

The four boys set off, all of them glad, really, to have an excuse for a walk. "There is this about it," remarked Smith, "Dunnage won't be likely to find us there."

In due course the garden gate was reached. Mrs. Grant was not about, so with a certain amount of stealth, which Biggles felt necessary to give colour to such an occasion, he led the way towards the far end of the overgrown garden.

As soon as he reached the bushes that covered the mouth of the cave he turned to Smith and said : " Somebody's been here since we were here last." Turning to Hervey he explained. "We always pulled a bush into the gap when we went in, and when we came away, so that nobody could see the cave. It made it more secret, if you see what I mean."

He pointed. "Somebody has pulled the bush out and forgotten to put it back."

"Probably Mrs. Grant," said Smith carelessly. "After all, it is her garden."

Biggles nodded. "I suppose you're right." He turned again to Hervey. " Well, there it is.

You can go in if you like."

"Aren't you coming ? "

"No. I've been in hundreds of times. I'll watch to see if Mrs. Grant comes out. She's been awfully decent to us, giving us apples and tea."

"Who's got any matches ? " asked Hervey.

They all felt in their pockets, but it so happened that nobody had any matches.

"What fools we were to come without matches,"

grumbled Hervey. "We ought to have thought of it." "Well, why didn't you ? " returned Brickwell. "How about you going back to the town to buy a box ? " suggested Hervey.

"We can bring matches another time," asserted Biggles. "You need a lot to get to the far end. Why don't you go in a little way ? There are no holes or anything to fall in."

"We'll just have a look now we're here," decided Hervey, and moving forward, accompanied by Brickwell, to the mouth of the cave, he peered in. "Looks pretty gloomy," he threw back over his shoulder. Biggles did not answer. He was standing transfixed, his eyes staring at something on the ground.

"What's up ? " asked Smith.

Biggles continued to stare. He pointed to a footmark clearly imprinted in a patch of soft earth.

With two hobnails missing it was unmistakable. "Dunnage 1" he gasped.

Hervey and Brickwell had already advanced a few yards into the cave. At Biggles' hiss of warning they turned, and seeing him gesticulating wildly, returned, looking surprised.

"What's the matter ? " asked Hervey.

Biggles drew a shuddering breath. "Dunnage—is —in there," he managed to get out. "

Run ! "

Without waiting to see if they followed his advice he turned about and streaked up the garden path towards the gate. Reaching it, he paused to throw a glance over his shoulder, and seeing the boys coming, kept on. He was, it must be admitted, badly shaken ; but then, he knew that if Dunnage had seen them he would be the selected victim. After going about a hundred yards, he waited for the others to catch up with him. There was a quick conference.

"How do you know Dunnage is in there ? " asked Hervey.

"I saw his footprint. If he isn't in there now he was in there recently. Just imagine—if we'

d gone in." He shuddered at the thought.

"I call that an ideal place for a murder," observed Brickwell, with a warmth which Biggles did not feel.

"What are we going to do ? " asked Smith. "We ought to do something."

Biggles agreed. "We must let the police know right away."

"He may have bolted by the time they get here,"

said Hervey sensibly. "Do you think he heard us ? "

"He must have heard us unless he was asleep.

Sounds echo horribly in the cave—don't they, Smith?"

Smith agreed.

"I tell you what," decided Biggles. "Two of us stay here and watch and the other two run to the police station."

"I'll go to the police station," offered Smith instantly, with a nervous glance over his shoulder.

"I'll go with you," said Brickwell.

"All right," agreed Biggles. "Hervey and I will keep watch to see if he bolts. I don't think he could catch us, if we had a fair start, even if he did see us."

Smith and Brickwell set off up the road at a run.

"We ought to have told them to tell the police to bring guns," observed Biggles to Hervey. "Dunnage has got a rifle—if he didn't break it over Grimble's head."

"The police will be all right," said Hervey confidentially. "Fancy Dunnage hanging about here all this time."

"It just shows," replied Biggles vaguely. "But I can't see we're doing any good standing here. If he bolts he'll keep off the road, so we shan't see him. We ought to get somewhere where we can see the mouth of the cave or, at any rate, the bushes."

"I'm not going into that garden," declared Hervey emphatically. "No

bally fear ! "

"Nor me," returned Biggles. "I don't think there's any need. If we get over the hedge here, and go up that field, we shall get above the entrance of the cave and ought to be able to look down on it. If Dunnage sees us we can bolt to the golf links. It would take him some time to climb up the bank through that tangle of briars and stinging nettles and things."

"All right," agreed Hervey.

Acting on the suggestion they climbed the hedge, and keeping well away from where the ground dropped steeply into the garden, went on for some little distance until Biggles decided they had gone far enough. Then, lying down, they wormed their way forward to a position from which they could overlook the mouth of the cave. Biggles reached it first, and went cold all over as his eyes fell on what he hoped, and was yet afraid, to see.

Dunnage was standing at the mouth of the cave, in a listening attitude, looking around him. "There he is ! " breathed Biggles.

"I can see him," whispered Hervey, who seemed to be choking with excitement. "Doesn't he look awful ? "

"Frightful. Don't move," whispered Biggles, edging back a little so that only his eyes and the top of his head showed above the grass.

Presently Dunnage retired into the cave.

"He must have heard us talking when we were down there," averred Hervey.

"I think so," answered Biggles in a hollow voice. "I wish the police would come. I'm scared stiff." "So am I."

Nothing more was said for a time. Both boys lay still, watching. Dunnage did not reappear. After a little while Biggles moved his position to what he thought was a better one, behind a big lump of rock, one of several that lay about. "We know he's still there, and that's something," remarked Hervey.

"Yes. That's something," agreed Biggles. "Hark!" He turned his head in the direction of the road, which could not be seen, but from which came a steady tramp of heavy boots. "

Here they come ! That must be the police," he went on with heartfelt relief. " You go and tell them that Dunnage is still inside."

"All right." Hervey went off.

Presently the footsteps stopped. There was a low murmur of voices, then silence.

Minutes passed, and it remained unbroken. Then a movement below caught Biggles' eye and he saw Grimble, his head still in bandages, crouching behind the apple tree. Still watching, he saw the inspector in some undergrowth. The sergeant, walking on tiptoe, appeared on the rough track leading to the cave. Hardly able to breathe from suppressed excitement, Biggles watched the police closing in on their objective. After what seemed a long time they finally stood together just outside the gaping entrance of the cave. All now drew their truncheons, weapons which, Biggles thought, looked singularly ineffectual against a mail armed with a rifle. The sergeant produced a bull's-eye lantern, lighted it, and then moved cautiously into the mouth of the cave. Forthwith he committed what seemed to Biggles to be a blunder of the greatest magnitude. He had supposed they would stalk the murderer in his lair and attempt to catch him off his guard, although this would obviously require a good deal of nerve, since, as they would be silhouetted against the light, they would make a simple target for Dunnage should he decide to fight it out.

Apparently the sergeant was well aware of this hazard, for, raising his voice, he shouted :

"Come on out of that ! It's the police here ! We know you're there ! " The words echoed eerily in the confined space, and nothing, thought Biggles, could have been better calculated to

cause the wanted man to remain where he was. He was not in the least surprised when there was no answer. The order to come out was repeated.

Dunnage did not come out. Biggles would have been surprised if he had.

The inspector now took a hand. "Come on, you can't get away ! " he shouted. "We've got you surrounded ! "

Still no sound came from the cave after the echo had died away.

The police now held a short discussion, and then, to Biggles' great admiration, prepared to take the place by storm. Biggles, on his part, prepared to run, for knowing the labyrinth at the end of the cave it was quite on the boards that Dunnage would give the police the slip after all.

In the event it did not come to that. The crack of a twig caused Biggles' eyes to switch to the spot from which the sound had come ; and there he saw a sight that was photographed indelibly on his brain for all time. It was Dunnage. Lying flat, with his eyes on the police, rifle ready for use, he was moving inch by inch in the manner of a snake across the face of the bank immediately below Biggles, and half-way between him and the police, who were just entering the cave.

How Dunnage got where he was Biggles could not for a moment imagine, for he had certainly not come out of the entrance. Then he remembered the small hole inside that had never been explored, and realised that it must have been made as an emergency exit should the original workmen find themselves trapped by a fall of rock.

For a second Biggles was petrified with shock. His mouth went so dry that he could not articulate. For the first time in his life he came near to fainting, for Dunnage was quite close, and as he was deep in long grass and weeds there seemed every reason why he should escape.

Let it be admitted here and now that what Biggles actually did was not prompted so much by fearlessness, as was afterwards alleged, as by a frantic desire to call the attention of the police to what was happening, and thus bring them to the spot before Dunnage could choke the life out of him, or bash him on the head as he had bashed Grimble. Self-preservation was the instinct that governed his action at that awful moment.

Getting to his knees, he put both hands against the rock behind which he had been lying, and pushed. Over the edge went the rock with a thump and a crash as it smashed its way through the flimsy weed and brushwood in its path.

Dunnage heard it coming, as he was bound to. He looked up, and sprang to his feet to get clear, for the boulder was coming down on top of him. He was a split second too late.

Even as he crouched to spring the boulder knocked his legs from under him, and he, and the rock, went rolling down the short hill together. Before he could get to his feet, the polite, who had, of

course, also heard the crash, were on him, and although he fought like a madman, using the most horrible language, he had no chance. A truncheon rose and fell, and presently the murderer was lying on his back with handcuffs on his wrists and Grimbles sitting on his chest.

Biggles waited for no more. He had seen enough. With a curious feeling that he was treading on air he raced down the hill to the road, shouting : "They've got him ! They've got him I "

Smith, Hervey and Brickwell came scrambling out of the ditch in which they had been hiding. "Have they really got him ? " shouted Smith, who was apparently taking no chances.

"They've got the handcuffs on him " yelled Biggles.

Smith danced with mad abandon, throwing his cap into the air, shouting " Hooray !

Hooray ! " Suddenly he stopped. "What if he breaks free again ? "

"I don't think he will," opined Biggles.

"He might ! " cried Smith. "Come on, I vote we get back to school ! "

"All right, let's," agreed Biggles, who felt as if a great weight had been lifted from his mind.

With one accord they broke into a run, shouting the news, "They've got him ! " to everyone they met.

And that, as far as is known, was the end of poaching in Foxley Wood. A week later the school broke up for the Christmas holidays and Biggles returned to his uncle for the festive season. But he did not join the shooting parties, for the sight of a pheasant brought back memories that he was anxious to forget.

A month later, at the county jail, Michael Dunnage paid the penalty demanded by the law for wilful murder. So, although Sam Barnes could not be brought back to life, he was at least avenged. Siggins was sentenced to a long term of imprisonment for his part in the affair.

Biggles received a letter from the Lord-Lieutenant of the County thanking him for the part he had played in bringing the murderer to justice, and congratulating him on the courage he had displayed at the critical moment. The rifle Dunnage carried was loaded, said the Lord-

Lieutenant, and had it not been for Biggles' presence of mind, one, at least, of the police officers would certainly have been shot.

As far as Biggles was concerned, the most important thing of all—as he told his uncle—

was that he could now return to school with an easy mind.

THE END

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